

Season Unending

The Snow Throat Bleeding

Loremaster Celarus

Psijic Order

Prologue

“Tell me again why we’re wasting time and dwindling resources chasing a legend. We don’t even know it exists!”

The Jarl’s voice boomed through the Palace’s main hall. Another discussion between his Majesty and his housecarl, it seemed. Another round of talk, no action, maybe some posturing. As it had been for the past three years.

“The Jarls are upset. They don’t all support you.”

“Damn the Jarls.”

He was being bold today, the man sitting on one of the benches thought. He helped himself to the food while better men talked of better deeds.

“They demand the Moot.”

“And damn the Moot! We should risk letting those milkdrinkers put Torygg’s woman on the throne? She’ll hand Skyrim over to the elves on a silver plate.”

The venison that day tasted good, summer’s fruits helping the meat’s flavor and texture. Same with the mead, and the lentils, and all other meals fit for a feast.

“All the more reason then. The crown would legitimize your claim.”

“A crown doesn’t make a king.”

“No, but this one—”

“If it even exists.”

“It exists. And it’ll be the symbol of the righteousness of our cause. Think about it. The Jagged Crown!”

Prologue

The housecarl paused, the eating man noticing a glint in his eye.

“It heralds back to a time before jarls and moots. Back to the time when a king was a king because his enemies fell before him, and his people rose because they loved him. Skyrim needs that king. You will be that king, Ulfric. You must be.”

“You’re certain you’ve found it?”

“We have, Jarl Ulfric.” The eating man finally stood. He breathed out, calmed his nerves. “My Imperial scouts had been crawling right outside that blasted tomb for days.”

“See?” the housecarl said. “The Dragonborn himself says so. What more proof of Shor’s favor? Of Ysmir Talos’s guidance?”

“Aye, Galmar.” The hall kept silent for a moment, a summer breeze wailing outside.

“Well, Junius,” the Jarl said. “What shall we make of your soldiers and armies?”

“Leave them to us,” he said. “I’ll lead them to their ruin.”

Galmar Stone-fist marched ahead with a cavalry retinue, as Junius Silanus watched from the long bridge to the rest of Eastmarch. It was a long road to Heljarchen. A long road to his family and friends. A longer one still, for Solitude. For Castle Dour and the loyalist leadership. For the war’s ending. All this, for his ill-hearthed home in Colovia. His solitude in the legion. His betrayal in Darkwater.

“Trouble, dear?” a woman’s voice called from the stables. Raven hair with grey-green eyes, dressed in a fur coat for the Eastmarch cold.

“Nothing, Lydia.”

“Time to go, my Thane,” a softer voice called. She was blonde, in a wool dress, her blade tucked beside her.

“Aye, Jordis.”

They climbed a carriage and they made West. The Dragonborn laid down with his two war-wives, and rested for the journey. The gods knew he needed it for what would come. For what he would do. During the war and after.

“Keep rest, my Thane,” the sword-maiden said as she kissed the Dragonborn’s forehead.

“We’ll rest and sleep tight in Proudspire before heading out with Hadvar,” Whiterun’s muse said, gripping his side.

“I know.” He sighed. “I know.”

Part I.

The Siege

Behold, in Darkness a Doom sweeps the land... These are
the closing days...

Last Will and Testament, Emperor Uriel VII Septim

Hadvar

Mid-das, 3 Last Seed

Hadvar darted awake in his wagon.

Haafingar's pines greeted him first thing that morning. Dragon's Bridge had already gone by, it seems. The Poenitus shouldn't have bothered them, an Imperial dragon banner hanging from the side. The ride bumped and shook, yet orders were orders. The Legion could spare nothing better.

He went straight to Castle Dour after alighting. More drills of the town guard, more practicing archers, more supply requisitions. Thalmor Justiciars hauling Shor worshippers to their headquarters, due for Northwatch Keep. Talos tithe collections following behind. The castle itself stank of torches' fumes and lamps' oil, the cool Haafingar climate and the castle's darkness mixing in for an unhealthy visit. Yet orders were orders, especially in these times. Hadvar mused over his luck as he strode past grimy courtyards, stuffy halls, dusty bookshelves. The Imperial Legion could afford no luxuries, not even regular maintenance, as the tide of war ebbed and flowed. This pile of mess was something else, however.

General Tulus and Legata Rikke stood by a map dotted with flags. It was time to break their navel gazing. With a stomp, Hadvar raised the Imperial salute, startling the commanders present.

"By Stendarr, give a little warning next time," the General swore. "Any news from Korvanjund?"

"The scouting party failed, Sire," Hadvar said. "No survivors."

"A few mummies are enough to set back the entire Legion." Tullius

1. *Hadvar*

chuckled. “That’s what I get for bringing an army of farmhands and croppers to the field.”

Hadvar cleared his throat. “It wasn’t just the scouts, Sire.”

“What—”

“Legatus Constantius Tituleius sent two centuries with the special recruit to secure the area. One of them was ambushed.”

The two commanders lost color from their faces. Tullius flailed his arm in the air, reaching for an absent chair.

“And the other?” Legata Rikke asked.

“Cut down from behind in the ruins.”

“Ulfric just has men everywhere,” the General said before storming off to a window. “Not even our ‘special’ recruit could help.”

Hadvar winced. The Legata took a few small blue flags and placed them in the Southern Pale, near enough to threaten Whiterun.

“Did you find anything unusual in the bodies?” Tullius asked.

“Many crossbow bolts.”

“Only vampire hunters use them here,” the Legata said.

“Don’t hold your breath if the Dawnguard started sidelining with mercenary work. Anything else?”

Hadvar grimaced. “We also found a few bodies a long way from the ambush site.”

“The Stormcloaks have a few giants with them,” the Legata said.

“The bodies were intact, ma’am. Usually Ulfric’s boys give their giants axes.”

Tullius looked up. “Cause of death?”

“The field healers say blunt-impact trauma.”

Tullius hummed in thought. Then he turned around in a sudden spin.

“Did you find our special recruit’s body?”

“I’ve no report, Sire.”

“Who else knew about the mission to retrieve the Jagged Crown?”

“Jarl Elisif, Sire,” Rikke said.

Tullius stared straight into Hadvar’s eyes. “Get to Whiterun.”

“At once, Sire.”

Hadvar walked briskly through Solitude’s streets, dreading the coming ride to Whiterun. Yet orders were orders. The Legion gave him his life, his daily bread, his protection from the darkness outside Imperial light. The rebellion would end like all things. It was his job to ensure it ended the right way for him and the Emperor.

The Emperor.

His Majesty was found with a slit throat aboard his own ship. Another Elder Council member was found dead in a Whiterun inn. Cyrodill, the Imperial City, even Whiterun stood as far lights of wealth and plenty for little Hadvar in his Riverwood. Reality’s cruel kindness had set in, for in these times he knew even they had their problems. Especially them.

Yet the Legion marched ever forward in life’s spitting face, preventing others from heading the same way.

Galmar

Lore-das, 20 Last Seed

Ysgramor's sons did their job well, Galmar thought. The woman called Huntress took care of the guards by Chillfurrow Farm, and Wintersand Manor inside it fell to the Dragonborn's war-wife, his Whiterun Housecarl. What loyalty she must have to betray her own uncle's throne. All Stormcloaks must have felt it, cutting themselves lose from what Tiber Septim himself created. Yet old Talos himself came far and away from old Atmora to build his Empire.

"Housecarl." The one they called Head-smasher entered Galmar's tent.

"Any news from the Western watchtower?"

"Our troops hold it." Head-smasher coughed. "The Dragonborn thinks he can squeeze into the city walls."

"He is thane, after all." Galmar turned to the fields surrounding the city. Whiterun's makings stood out even this far away. He could imagine the locals thought the same for his troops' deployment just outside. The camp stood near a citizen's farm, Severio Pelagia. A simple farmer, unused to war's hardship. Much less a siege's. No matter the cost, Galmar had made peace with his king's war long ago. Farmers like Severio would once again call to Talos for harvest and planting once more without fear of taxation.

"How does he plan to squeeze in?"

"Take some of his Housecarls and the Companions as prisoners. Then they would open the drawbridge."

"Typical Imperial snakery." Galmar laughed. "Give him the go

ahead.”

“Already did. He should be deep in the Cloud District by now.”

Galmar smiled. He left his tent, good news in hand, the sun surprising his eyes. His men had started pounding away on nails and floorboards. Ladders, towers, battering rams. Their whole army had gathered only today, the Dragonborn their rallying point. No more would they wait in musty caverns, under fallen trees, in hostile cities under guard.

“Remember Darkwater,” a man cheered. “Remember white-gold. Skyrim belongs to the Nords.”

The men cheered and the giants bellowed. Among them lay the first onagers some of the recruits ever built. A fresh one, barely more than a boy, kept a wide grin as he poured oil on the stone and tore flint and steel next to it. A troop in bearhide struck a mechanism. The first spark of the war had ignited the fire to consume the Empire’s oppression.

“This is it, men,” Galmar’s voice echoed through the camp. “They say that our cause is false and that we are nothing more than thieves, thugs and murderers.” Jeers and anger, ringing around. Galmar knew where to lead it. “But no. We are farmers. We are craftsmen. We are sons and daughters of shopkeepers, maid servants and soldiers. We are the sons and daughters of Skyrim. And we have come this far because our cause is true. Because we fight as one. And because our hearts are bursting with anger! What we do here today, we do for our country.” Cheers and applause. “For all the true Nords of Skyrim!”

The men began charging forward. Another day’s work, Galmar thought. He turned to Head-smasher. “Don’t be too heavy on the mead later, Hjornskar.”

“Aye, Housecarl.”

2. *Galmar*

An ensemble of onagers followed suit in rhythm. On cue, bands of Eastmarch bannermen took to the ladders and they moved across the plains onward to Whiteruns's walls. Select freemen warriors climbed on the towers and began their slow movement downward Whiterun's trench. The rams would hold a little longer. The Dragonborn had given no signs of success. For all the men knew, he had only turned turncoat twice.

Yet no time for worry remained. The Whiterun guardsmen kept loosing arrows on the besiegers.

"Shield wall. No arrows ought to touch even the ground."

"Should've screamed at them earlier," Galmar shouted. A servant hurried to his side, and Galmar took from him a pollaxe. He set his eyes to any dirt or defect deposited in the last twenty years. No new damage greeted him.

"Rally to me. Onward to the gates."

The men shouted agreement, and set into a shield wall to protect the ram. Galmar saw little movement on the towers. Imperial battemages had already started targeting them, if the flaming wood and electrecuted giants told truth.

"Dunmer, to your stations. Show why you deserve Ulfric's mercy in the Grey Quarter."

"For old Ebonheart!" the auxiliaries cheered. Ulfric had fed them honeyed words of olden pacts when he welcomed the latest waves of refugees. He only wondered on the field whether their new pact would go beyond. They had torn down the ancient wall to let them build their alien houses, mushroom spires and mud bricks now ice-white from the snow. How many dividends would it pay.

The auxiliaries casted wards over towers still standing. Ulfric's Bannermen kept their march, crossbows aimed at any guardsman who

dared show his head. A treacherous device, lacking honor, yet all proper against an honorless foe. The first ladders went up in due time, marksmen taking stance against foolish disruptors.

“Is the Wind District really a proper first target for the ladders?” an officer murmured to Galmar.

“They call you Oath-giver, Gonnar. Keep yours to Ulfric, for he gave his to Skyrim and Shor.”

The ram went past old stores and homes, ramshackle slums, many unfit for city walls forced to make shelter outside. These forefronts faced first fire, cinder and ash remaining. Some loyalists loosed at them from within. They joined the buildings around them in one final home on the ground.

At last they drew close to the drawbridge. Many troops had already gathered over it, bearing blocks of stone and barrels of boiling oil. At this time, no word came from within the city.

“Did the Dragonborn keep his?” Gonnar said.

“We have other ways inside.”

The ram kept moving. Axuliaries made short work of defenders above. A giant then started clawing at the drawbridge, fighting to lower it as some worried guardsmen burst their veins keeping it lid. The giant kept clawing and clawing, till the moment an arrow caught his foot. His form fell into the moat, blood mixing with drainage water. Galmar could see the men by wallside shivering, wavering. His own protecting the ram whispered among themselves.

“Keep moving, Sons of Skyrim, Stormcloaks,” Galmar ordered. “For Shor. For Talos and his truest son.”

“Ysmir guide us,” a troop replied.

With his order came a loud shout. STRUN BAH QO. Storm clouds gathered, and rain and lightning fell upon the defenders. The bat-

2. Galmar

tleimages fell first, then scores of Whiterun guardsmen. The shivering troops rejoiced in the cold rain and the men by the ram cheered with their shields. The drawbridge had fallen.

The Voice would sound twice more. OD AH VIING. DUR NEH VIIR. Galmar turned to a loud roar from the Southeast. A gash of red and a stream of fire, falling on legionaries far ahead, greeted him. Then the ruckus of metal and flesh made him jolt. His dead brothers had risen again, rallying to a dragon of dying flesh.

“Orkey have mercy for this.”

“Akatosh’s work?” Gonnar asked. A few men flinched, whispering for Alduin’s lengthened slumber.

Galmar could rouse only awe. “By the Nine,” he said. “What sights the Liberation brings.”

The drawbridge had fallen and only the gate remained. The ram moved up past charred splinters, detached limbs, undead thralls, up to guardsmen hiding in the bulwark surrounding the gate. The red dragon promptly enveloped the structure in flames. They would only find charred flesh later, Galmar thought. Fallen warriors, honorable and brave, denied proper rites. Only Sovngarde awaited, and Galmar felt comfort in the fallen’s banquet. Far ahead, Galmar could see flame and lightning, wards and death throes. One lone guardsman, his helmet chipped, came out of the corner of Galmar’s eye. He fell to a crossbow behind him.

A party of warriors dressed in all black, and an Imperial in Companions’ wolf armor and a legionary horseman’s helm. They strode past the guard and went down the stairs. The Voice would sound again. FUS RO DAH. The gates, standing amid flames, fell outward past Galmar’s men. The Colovian stepped outside and said nothing as Stormcloaks poured in. Galmar saw that the Colovian carried an enchanted axe, the same one he had received with his Thane’s honors. Men of honor

fought for their Jarl and their King. The Dragonborn himself raised Ulfric's banner, hidden in a nearby blacksmith's forge, and bade Galmar and his men to rally.

Lydia

Lore-das, 20 Last Seed

The Hammerfell courser buckled on the uneven plain and Lydia alighted for letting reinforcements relieve the siege would question her honor to her thane and husband. A few arrows from their vanguard would never stop her.

Her Alik'r companions took to flight, loosing arrows to cover their housecarl. Lydia herself took down an Imperial archer with a crossbow. No time to nock it. She took out her shield and she dashed for the javelinman aiming for the Alik'r. A bash on his helmet was enough to take him.

"Rally to her!" an Alik'r signalled. They brought out their lances and locked their shields on their horses' heads and ran down the vanguard's archers. A rider brought Lydia's horse to her. She mounted it and they all moved in pursuit.

"I told your thane we should have moved into Rorikstead first," said the Alik'r commander, a sturdy man with back-swept hair.

"We couldn't cut them off there, Kematu. All forces need to take the city."

"If the war-wife says so." Kematu drank from his flask. "We should stop the pursuit in a while."

"Yes."

The riders went on to Gjukur's monument. She had accompanied her thane there to settle the souls of dead lovers. She blushed at the memory, where her feelings had sparked like it did many times. The monument itself commemorated the fallen in the War of the Red Di-

amond. Lydia had heard her father tell of it, in Dragonreach's warm halls, around the Bannered Mare's bonfire, by the Skyforge's embers. A queen, hungry for power, able in dark practices, usurper to a rightful claim. Her father had repeated the story she asked for so many times around the city. She knew not how he would make it out with Uncle Balgruuf. Yet they all had their oaths and honor, unlike the Queen.

"You seem to have fond memories here."

"Junius and I went here on a quest once."

"Guess you carried his burdens well."

"He wouldn't have taken me if I didn't."

The Alik'r set up barricades and fighting positions around the sunken monument. The road above led straight to the Stormcloaks' camp and baggage train. Defenders by the monument's area could halt any reinforcements.

"Keep the casters hidden until the legionaries start going down," Lydia said. "They should be encamped near Rorikstead now."

"Do we just delay them?"

"Pretty much."

"I would've preferred if we had more men to deal with them here and now." Kematu looked Northward. "A home bleeding and dying from Imperial perfidy. You remember your thane's little escapade with me."

"Saadia was a nice lady. I never thought she could have done something that horrible."

"Familiarity breeds contempt. You've seen her a couple of times tending to patrons, I've seen her turn over an entire city to the slaughter." A late summer breeze blew ashes from the East. The men looked around. "This," Kematu raised his hand, "is what I follow your thane for."

3. *Lydia*

Horsemen gathered near the monument to receive their blessing from the Yokudan priest, and they galloped toward Rorikstead, scouting Imperial positions. Lydia nocked her crossbow again, setting it to the North. Any reinforcements to Whiterun would need to cross the monument. Lydia sighed and thought of Breezehome. Where they could follow Shor into Sovngarde. A home where Talos could send his gifts to fellow men. Where a peaceful picture of Skyrim could live.

A lone rider bearing the warriors' Duneripper standard, cloth tail flying from an iron head. His horn blew loud. Sign of an attack, as Lydia had learned.

"News from Blackmoor?" she asked.

"Cavalry host. Cataphracts, archers, some mages. Their banners a wreathed Red Diamond."

"The Pale Pass is clear?"

"Not sure. For all that we know, they came through an airship."

"Everyone, to positions."

Archers nocked, their focus on gullies and hillsides funneling the loyalists. Mages and crossbowmen aligned behind ridges. Lydia herself with her crossbow, sulphur and saltpeter-laden bolts enriched with magicka. Then the rumbling.

"Ready yourselves!"

A Yokudan chant, followed by a fireball loosed onto the horizon. Sound of a ward breaking, followed by cries.

"Stop! Peace! We wish to join you!"

Lydia looked over to Kematu, who shrugged. "Who are you? What do you need from us?"

"We'll drop our weapons! Let us show ourselves first! Please, don't loose at us."

“Alright! Show yourselves.”

Banners of the wreathed Red Diamond, their bearers in grime-laced armor, with faces dirtied and muddied.

“Who are you?”

“We swore our lives to the Nine,” a rider said. He had unfastened his helmet to show his dishevelled face and hair. “All the Nine. No force on Nirn, elf, man, empire, can ever stop us from doing so.”

“You’re defectors?”

“No. We can’t defect if we’ve never been loyal to such a cause.”

“Why come to us now of all times and places?”

“To send a message.” The rider revealed a scrolls under his surcoat. “Your time is wasted in this crag. The loyalists have their own plans.”

Kematu took the scroll, smelling it, running a glowing hand across it. “All clear.”

The legion’s plans, troop movements, troop positions. Projected in face of an invasion on neutral Whiterun.

“These are accurate?”

“As far as we can tell. They were supposed to take Dawnstar first, but Ysmir traded it away for a short peace.”

“Who are you?”

“We follow the Divine Crusader in his mission against elves. That includes supporting the Dragonborn and his quests.”

“What have you been doing all this time? You look worse for wear.”

“Fighting a war in the shadows, in support of Jarl Ulfric. Skyrim doesn’t stand alone. Many wish to see the Empire break apart, let the nations govern themselves.”

Lydia nodded, humming. “Alright then. Will you join us back to

3. *Lydia*

Whiterun?”

“We’re off to the Reach. The Dragonborn had us carry a message to old prison friends.”

“Alright.”

The riders mounted, speeding to the West. The Alik’r themselves had started mounting when Kematu approached Lydia.

“You think they’re telling the truth?”

“Beats me.” Lydia mused over what the rider gave her. “Either way, the top brass should see this.”

“Can’t we just show it to Junius?”

“Junius needs the Stormcloaks for now. They need to see this.”

“Very well.”

The host went back across the rough plain, their earthworks burned and broken as they retreated.

Hadvar

Mid-das, 31 Last Seed

Lockstep on the road from Dawnstar marched columns of legionaries, fresh from the ships, green in their Haafingar and Winterhold villages, now turning amber and red as the war headed for autumn. They had passed the city of Dunstad a few days ago, and Hadvar had reign on where to go next. The crossroads lay ahead. Moving ahead gave a straight path to Eastmarch. The road narrowed, however, and twisted into guerrilla hideouts, bandit caves, Falmer overlooks. It was a legionary maxim: where the enemy lay absent, expect traps.

Hadvar looked right to a stone monument. A hidden shrine to Talos, free from tithes, defended by ice wraiths. Hadvar wondered if the Divine Man's fury had awakened when his home sundered in a fiery snowstorm. All should have been well for it had not yet fallen. Not yet.

"Turn right to Whiterun," Hadvar ordered to his centurions. "In little more than half a week we should reach Whitewatch Tower. Resistance to the rebels must have formed there already."

"At once, Tribune," the first spear centurion affirmed.

"Tribune, with all due respect." A man accompanied by pack donkeys trotted to the meeting.

"Yes, Prefect Orthus Endario?"

"Our supply train from Dawnstar cannot and will not handle a march that far in such a short time."

"You want us to stay in this cold with the men's morale about to shambles?" the first spear protested.

"Having them march in this cold hungry will do them worse."

4. *Hadvar*

Hadvar hummed. “You might want to tie those donkeys somewhere while we sort this out. Since you want us to stay here, after all.”

“I’m willing to hear other opinions, Tribune.”

Hadvar moved closer to the shrine of Talos. “You see this monument, Prefect?”

“A miracle it wasn’t destroyed after its tithes stopped flowing into Summerset.”

“It will be a miracle too if we stay here and Whiterun holds.”

“We’ve seen one still standing.”

“We’ll tell the men our hunger pleases the Eight or Nine or Eighty-Nine, whomever wants to be pleased. The fields ahead should provision us enough even with the lacking supplies.”

“And the farmers, Tribune?”

“The Legion gave them light in Tiber Septim’s wars. We shall give them that light in this horrible cold afterward.”

Orthus nodded. “I’ll see to our mobilization, then.”

“First Spear Metilius, tell the same to your men, and for every Centurion to do likewise.”

“Aye, Tribune.”

“March on to Whiterun.”

The lockstep of boot and metal carried forward. Hadvar mounted a destrier and watched them proceed. A stream of red and steel, each flowing together over the silver-white snow. Hadvar had come upon the fields ahead a long time past. Imperials from Cyrodiil lived there, urban folk who found new life in Skyrim’s wilderness. Just like the special recruit, Hadvar thought.

He had been a prisoner in Ulfric’s detail, set to lose his head like

him and the rest of his party. Did they really work together? Even if the recruit was Dragonborn, really did vanquish the World-Eater. Or maybe the Legion started its own demise. Another disillusioned fellow, joined the Stormcloaks out of spite. They had captured many farmers like the ones up ahead, Imperials journeying to Windhelm for their new home and meeting a lynching instead of their outlaw king.

The legion moved ahead the next four days. Only the lone bandit party, isolated undead, a rogue caster here and there, a giant tending to his flock of mammoths. Simple threats, yet the world's ending for simple folk. Hadvar tended to his hunger by chewing on snow. Orthus was right, everyone knew. Their priorities had no time for distress, however.

The cold bit them even as they moved onto downward slopes. Donkeys bellowing, men grumbling, the first spear throwing verbal jabs. The prefect kept a quiet and steady pace, however.

"In the name of the Emperor, I hope we won't be in the wild too long now."

Hadvar winced. "Show some respect, Metilius. His late majesty would be fuming at our performance in the war."

"The ambush, Tribune. Remember how Legatus Tituleius got sacked," the Prefect said.

"Only proof of what I said."

"That is what I mean." The donkeys behind them kept bellowing as the air got warmer southward. "We have no clue on how high command has been handling the war. Have we even cleared the Pale Pass yet?"

"We will clear it, Prefect," Metilius said. "In the meantime we ought to deal with Whiterun and not our superiors."

"Just a thought, Centurion. What could be going on back in Cy-

4. *Hadvar*

rodiil?”

“We all have our worries.” Hadvar sighed. “But for now, let us eat to our contentment. Look there.”

A farmstead popped up over the distance. Farmers kept tending to their fields, even as faint traces of smoke and cinders reached them. Far and over ahead, a show of lightning and flame kept its performance. Hadvar swore that he saw figures similar to the World-Eater that day.

“Get the gold ready. No produce goes unpaid.”

“You said they’d do it for our apparent light,” Metilius said.

“We only reflect the sun’s light, anyway. Gold can do that better.” The pack donkeys trotted aimlessly as Orthus rested. “Get the gold,” Hadvar ordered.

“At once.” A cache of septims and other currency, sure to please the downtrodden in downtrodden times. The legionaries lined up, true to their training. Such discipline suited Skyrim’s harshness.

Each man received his share of food and drink, enough to fill the next few days. Hadvar and his officers gathered with the farmowners for a simple banquet, no small pleasure in events of big worry.

“Goodman Loreius, thank you again for your bounty,” Hadvar said.

“My honor to supply the Legion, and to support my wife.”

“My honor to meet such good people. I hope your wife’s been doing well”.

“We’ve had run-ins with more excitable Nords. Otherwise, she’s doing fine as an Altmer could do this far North.”

“What know you of the situation down South?” Metilius asked.

“Only that the gates have fallen. The Stormcloaks have kept only to the Plains District so far.”

“Must be brutal there,” Orthus said. “Such a grinder if there’s been no movement in one district over many days.”

“There was a short truce for the Harvest Festival.” The farmer’s face flushed. “The fighting resumed today. We think it will only get worse henceforth.”

“That is why we’re here,” Hadvar said. “To make sure it doesn’t.”

“Of course, Sire.”

“Hadvar will do. From one son of Skyrim to another.”

The sun fell late and the men rejoiced in their new rest and rations. Whiterun lay two days’ march ahead, only one if Hadvar ordered a fast march. He forced his mind off the coming hardship and headed for present mirth. There would be plenty of time for the former, after all.

Bryling

Fre-das, 26 Last Seed

The Blue Palace kept slumber again today. Bryling herself almost dozed off, managing Haafingar's finances. A warrior she had been, with enough mettle for High King Torygg to award her a thaneship. Her fire had not died out, yet armies and commanders now took charge in battle. The Stormcloaks knew that too. If she were any dumber, she would have charged back with sword in hand. Any dumber, however, and she never would have becomethane.

Now her place kept her to old files, reports from her owned mine near Morthal, the rare late delivery, all mundanity behind mortal horror surely awaiting them. Yet mundanity had its use. And its horrors.

"My lady."

An old man, decked in battered mail and little else. Her housecarl had paid another one of his checkups.

"Yes, Irnskar?"

"News from the front."

Seems today had less mundanity than she expected. "Please do tell."

"Tribune Hadvar reports that he is ready to relieve the Siege of Whiterun."

"I just bet you'd like to join."

"Aye, my lady, but my place is here, guarding you."

"Of course. We all have our places in this war."

"Endarie also has a new gown ready."

"That's the fifth free one I've gotten from her."

“Times are hard.”

“Well at least she’s grown to hate everyone a little less.”

The elder housecarl departed, and Bryling went back to her papers. A pen had weaker bite than a sword, yet it kept the machine of war just as oiled, if not more. Her mine could use some more protection against Stormcloak spies, after all. She chuckled, for levity amid duty keeping everyone sane.

“I could handle that for you.”

A man in orange finery, eyes tired yet face kept fresh by the court mage’s tricks. Elisif’s steward had entered without warning, clutching her writing hand.

“It’s okay, Falk.” She kissed his hand. “Just sending a good portion of the Legion to defend Rockwallow from Stormcloaks and spies.”

“Sybille will have a field day if you keep joking like that.”

Bryling laughed. “No harm there.” She jotted one last signature. “It’s done. We can go to the market and just shop.”

“Aye.”

Anytime before, Bryling would have dreaded being in the open with Falk beside her. The other thane, rival to the Jarl’s influence, would have threatened action and have the Jarl wrapped around his finger. Yet a stranger had come, had become a new thane, and had gone on to expose his corruption. Never would Thane Erikur be welcome in Solitude’s court again.

The past gave good reminiscences, but nothing happier than Bryling in the market, just strolling with Falk Firebeard. The market was full, as it usually was on Lore-das. Farmers and craftsmen from nearby villages selling wares, the fruit of their labors, by people under her charge. Falk haggled for pretty trinkets, his silver tongue winning some and losing others. Bryling giggled as he placed one or the other

5. *Bryling*

on her. Jarl Elisif had once wanted General Tullius to liven her subjects with a parade, pomp and pride on full display. Yet simple joys came from seeing their Thane have a lively stroll with the court steward. Bryling knew that she and Falk at least took joy from it.

“A septim more? Do you want to bankrupt the hold’s treasury?”

“Unless you engage in corruption, I don’t see how it would.”

Bryling laughed at his new show. “Give it a rest, Falk. Give the man his septim.”

“Fine.” The orange-robed man placed another coin in the already present pile. He took the apples and he handed one to his lady.

“Aw, thank you.”

They sat on a hard stone bench facing the Bard’s college. The festival last year had taken a good bit of convincing for the Jarl. The new Thane came in handy then. King Olaf, scourge from Windhelm, burnt for his treachery in front of a wide crowd. To think it was momentarily banned for its anti-royal message. Jarl Elisif was eager to rule, yet sometimes Bryling hoped she’d see nuance at times.

“Wonder if we’ll have the festival this year,” she said.

“The Bard can afford the preparations. It’s all a matter of people would attend.”

“Too many recruits away?”

“Too much fear of an attack.”

Bryling sighed. “I don’t think even Ulfric is mad enough to strike all the way here.”

“Not just an infiltrator or saboteur.” Falk cleared his throat. “They say the Stormcloaks control dragons and undead.”

“Tall tales sure are trembling.”

“We’ve had reports of that from Whiterun of all places.”

Bryling jolted up. “Whiterun?”

“I intercepted a dreamsleeve transmission. Gave me a frightful nightmare too.”

The undead, two dragons, giants throwing projectiles, a mystical storm favoring the Stormcloaks, vampire hunters. Strange reports yet all too real nonetheless. They all came from an Imperial Legatus, after all. Bryling felt a pang of fear, yet only a pang. She put her self into Falk’s arms for even a moment of comfort. Whether it was for him or for her, she didn’t even want to know.

“Things will be alright,” she said.

“We Nords were the first to vouch for the Mede Dynasty. We will also be the last, the Nine willing.”

Bryling flinched. “Not here, you fool.”

“Aye. Sorry, my lady.”

They went to her home near the Blue Palace. Times now turned to terror, yet even a home could give assurance. Her bed’s warmth and a stewards’s love gave more than enough for times to come.

Galmar

Morn-das, 5 Hearthfire

“News from the city?”

The siege took another quiet turn today. Their two pet dragons, as the men loved calling them, kept busy hunting stray mammoths and pursuing imperial scouts. The siege equipment kept still, their purpose served. The fighting in the city continued, yet the minor quarrel here and there served no end other than to release frustration.

“We’ve taken the Bannered Mare,” Hjornskar said.

“And?”

“That’s all the progress we’ve made.”

Galmar fought to keep from sighing. He did so anyway. “The Dragonborn?”

“He said he’d help out in Whitewatch tower.”

“Blasted Imperials wouldn’t even deal with the bandit camp that used to lay near it, yet they think they can take it back.”

He returned to a map of Whiterun Hold. Whatever troops they had by Rorikstead were surely diversionary. The main axis of reinforcement lay by Dawnstar. Winterhold kept by Ulfric, yet those discontented with the collapse’s effects had volunteered in droves to the Legion. The reinforcements dared not to go for Eastmarch, however. Galmar’s eyes perked up. Imperials thought being crafty was a virtue. Even Galmar saw merit now in schemes.

“Get me a Dunmer to do a dreamsleeve transmission.”

The Dunmer entered the tent just as Galmar finished etching. The

mage began his rituals and gestures, all to transmit coded plans and orders. Galmar handed his parchment, symbols and legends inscribed within.

“The Labyrinthian, security protocol dragonbone form-wards.”

The Dunmer finished his act, and the message went through. It should take a short time for his orders to be carried. Enough for Galmar to scope his next moves.

He left the tent and moved over to the nearest fire. Autumn would set in shortly, the trees and grass around them marking it. Even with a bear cloak, the cold stung. Galmar always welcomed a warm fire.

“We took these from the inn, Sire.” A soldier gestured to meat and vegetables, seemingly fresh yet frozen with ice wraith teeth.

“A fit booty today.” He took venison almost completely roasted and bit off a generous piece. “Need to keep the troops fed or they’ll die in their beds rather than by the sword. Skyrim wishes no such end for her children.”

“Aye, Sire. You think she’d want her children sober too?”

The soldiers snickered and laughed. Galmar let loose a chuckle. “It’s for the best. Need all our strength if the siege gets ugly again.”

“I’ll say. Never expected all these to happen.”

“Dragons, giants, the undead, vampire hunters, Ysgramor’s Companions, Hammerfell nomads. When I signed up, you told me no mercenaries, Sire.”

“They’re the Dragonborn’s own. They may fight for him instead of Skyrim, but a sword is a sword, especially in the loyalists’ hearts.”

“Fine warriors these Imperials are though.”

“Agreed. Meeting them in Sovngarde would be an honor. Ain’t that right, Sire?”

6. *Galmar*

“Of course. Sovngarde doesn’t choose who goes there. We do.”

No onagers went into action today. Troops inside needed to be alive to fight, and onagers could not tell who was friend or foe. A little thought would do wonders in the Liberation. Just as Imperials knew it could help their oppression.

The sun moved across the sky, a window into Aetherius and its realm of magicka. Galmar could have learned magic if he bothered to. Yet he chose a life in the Legion, all those decades ago. Still, he kept a tome of healing nearby for the basics. It saved his life in the Red Ring, while Ulfric led his century forward. He remembered those days very well. Even in the joy of victory, Ulfric still mourned his friend’s injury. Delphine, Rikke, other veterans could talk of abstract ideals, of politics, of higher concepts. Yet Ulfric knew that a King needed to tend to his people, not keep to an office and deal with paperwork all the time.

When he had gathered his thoughts by day’s end, galloping sounded over by the bridges to the East. They carried the silver bear over a blue background. Among them, a man aged by his experiences, bearing the Jagged Crown.

“Long live the High King!” Cheers streamed from men sitting idly, relaxing, tending to their wounds. Galmar ran to the bannermen and kneeled.

“Rise, friend. I come as King, not Shor himself.” A warm smile melted Ulfric’s cold face.

“And to you I come as housecarl, not footstool.” Laughs echoed in night’s rising darkness.

They prepared a table with food pilfered from the Bannered Mare. Ulfric helped himself to a simple meal, a small slice of boar with potatoes.

“My King—”

“The men fought today and the past few weeks, not me.”

Galmar nodded, and brought another large slice of venison to his plate. Royal matters bore on them, so royal manners took over. He took a knife, sliced a bite, and brought it to his mouth with a fork. No fast business, yet a good one in a King’s presence.

“How goes the siege?”

“Whiterun is stubborn. So are Balgruuf and that Legatus Quentin.”

“Our special asset should have found them no problem.”

“Not the way you think. He sneaked in and opened the gates for us, but now we have problems breaking into the Wind District.”

“I swear they tore down the gatehouses between districts.”

“They have shackled-up gatehouses now to manage traffic. Also to close down in cases like ours.”

“Our flying friends couldn’t help?”

The two dragons flew overhead in another round of mammoth hunting.

“Enchanted against fire.”

“Oh.”

The feast carried on deeper into the night. A soldier brought out a looted lute and started a tune. “We drink to our youth, and to days come and gone.”

“For the Age of Oppression is just about done,” others replied in tune.

The song continued as Ulfric discussed lighter manners. “The Dragonborn came to me, and asked ‘what does it mean to be Dragonborn?’ I never knew, because having the *thu’um* doesn’t make you a fellow Dragonborn or anything.”

The officers laughed. Galmar allowed himself a smile.

6. *Galmar*

“So I just gave general advice from what I read in High Hrothgar. ‘You’re Dragonborn. The rules don’t apply to you. Shout like a dragon does.’ I guess it worked now that the war’s gone and started.”

More laughter. Even Galmar went into a fit.

“Where is he, anyway?”

“Helping repulse Imperial reinforcements up North,” Galmar reported.

“Well that won’t do now, will it. Get him to break into the Wind District tomorrow.”

“At once, my King.”

“Not now, you blasted bear. Let’s drink to our youth and to days come and gone tonight.”

“For the Age of Oppression is just about done!” the officers cheered.

“If you insist, Ulfric.” Galmar called a servant, who promptly brought kegs of mead and beer to them.

“See you in Sovngarde if this proves to be folly,” said the High King.

“We swear it,” answered his retinue of officers.

Lydia

Tir-das, 6 Hearthfire

A volley of crossbow bolts met the Imperial shieldwall marching to Whitewatch Tower. It stalled them enough for Lydia to direct Odahviing to them.

A roar came overhead, followed by a stream of flame. Imperial battlemages could cast every ward they could, but their magicka drained enough for Durnehviir to do a next round of life draining magic. Imperial archers tried their best to be Blades reborn. Odahviing responded by taking them for supper.

The Dawnguard present casted protections on themselves and their small fort. Not enough to hold out forever, but suitable for their foes. Durnehviir would sweep by and bring fallen Imperials as thralls. Lydia swore she saw a few legionaries kneel and break down, fighting fallen comrades.

Alik'r raiders darted past the tower's right flank, harassing the Imperial left. No disciplined shieldwall mattered if discipline broke down and legionaries sprinted in pursuit of horsemen. The Alik'r ran them down in a methodical melee. By noon, the wave had stopped, and the legionaries sounded an organized retreat. Any thought of cohesion fell apart as the dragons began another round at the Imperial rear. Legionaries scattered across the plain as they fled for their lives, not wishing to die so hideous deaths. The Alik'r would pick them apart, by bow or lance. What remained of the Imperial vanguard, about to do a rear guard action, fell in formation for a last stand. Battlemages kept a steady ward overhead.

"They might wish a parley," a man in a wolf helmet shouted to Lydia.

7. *Lydia*

“I’ll get the dragons to stop for a while. Get ready our terms, Vilkas.”

Lydia waved to the two, gesturing to stop. They nodded and headed back to Whiterun, joining her husband for another breakthrough attempt into the Wind District.

Lydia went forward with a Dawnguard shieldwall surrounding her. The Imperial vanguard kept in formation, and the battlemages kept up their wards. They stood in a circle, leaving the Stormcloaks no direction for surprise but below them. Lydia knew that not even they could bring a surprise like that now.

“Men of the Empire,” Lydia started. “We wish to parley. I assure you, no one will be hurt.”

“Ulfric promised a fair duel,” a man in a prefect’s scale armor said. “All Torygg got was the thu’um.”

“No honor from Stormcloaks!” the legionaries cheered.

“I am not a Stormcloak. No one here is.”

“You serve the turncoat Dragonborn.”

“The dragons are gone.”

“To return at any moment we believe.”

Vilkas came galloping on a courser. “I’d say you wish to parley after we’ve strip our clothes off.”

“It’ll help assure us, methinks.”

“What jokers. Come, Lydia, let’s just kill them.”

“You sound like your brother.”

“In this case he’d be right to act fast for once.”

Lydia sighed, and she turned to the legionaries. “Our dragons have better use in Whiterun. You know the city still stands.”

“The more time we take from you here, the better for us.”

“We can kill you easily. Your mages are about to run out of magicka. We have the best crossbowmen in Tamriel ready to cut you down in any moment.”

The prefect looked around. “Let us find our tribune from the fallen. Then we’ll retreat. I give my word.”

“What does your word mean?” Vilkas asked.

“As someone the Dragonborn helped once. In Windhelm, long ago.”

Lydia’s eyes shone. “The East Empire Company man?”

“Yes.”

Lydia hummed, then turned to Vilkas. “Let them do what they wish.”

Vilkas grunted, then sighed. “Alright. But they have to drop their weapons first.”

Orthus Endario nodded, and he dropped his sword and shield. The other legionaries followed suit. Seeing this, the Dawnguard followed Vilkas back to Whitewatch Tower.

“Thank you, Lydia was it?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll retrieve our fallen tribune, then we’ll leave.”

The search ran for hours. At last, they found a bloodied man, only barely breathing, his armor scales burnt and bent.

“He’s alive! Hadvar lives!”

A few battlemages went to the tribune, carrying healing flasks and preparing healing spells. Lydia looked around, and saw the Dawn-guard’s healer.

“Go to them, Florentius.”

“Of course, my lady.”

7. *Lydia*

Florentius went to the scene, accompanied by Dawnguard infantry. “May I?” he asked. They must have agreed, for Lydia saw Hadvar jolt awake in full color.

“You’re alive, Tribune,” Ortho said.

The Tribune looked around, and saw only the dead. “We lost.”

“We accepted a parley in exchange for your life.”

“Gods damn it.”

He motioned to stand, but he only shook and collapsed. The tribune could only grunt and curse his fate. Lydia knew that the Imperials had lost all hope of saving Whiterun, and could only lap their wounds by defending other holds. Some mounted Alik’r took a stretcher and landed it near them. Ortho gave his thanks, and soon the remaining vanguard had begun carrying off their tribune back to the Pale.

Lydia slumped in her bedroll, the long day taking its toll. Junius was back in the urban grinder, Talos and the other Eight doing who knows what to set the outcome. Talos came from man’s loyalty, valor, honor, prayer. She wondered, however, if He or Shor had say in elven matters.

Junius had told of an old story. Skyrim lived from the Snow Throat, its crowning gem the peace of the Way of the Voice. Destroying that peace, letting hostile influence in, sundering the tower of snow would let the Thalmor win. Junius had admitted all these to her after their marriage in Riften. She felt turmoil, dissension, conflict, yet after all that she chose Junius and Skyrim over her own father and uncle.

What cruel play the gods had staged, and what evil script tormented its actors.

Ralof

Morn-das, 12 Hearthfire

Labyrinthian rumbled while men moved supplies, quartermasters carted off weapons, alchemists prepared potions and powders. Ralof kept his eye toward Morthal, across large snow banks which gathered from autumn snow showers.

“Are the cannon ready?” an officer asked.

“Yes, Arrald.”

“Galmar must have taken the brain of the bear which gave his armor if he thinks this will work.”

“That’s no way to speak of the housecarl.”

“I just hope the walls here can hold firm for a protracted siege.”

Ralof inspected the troops far-off. Infantry, mages, archers. No organized bands like the Legion had, yet their discipline would be their weakness today. Ralof also knew how garrisons in these places acted. Sleepy like their towns. Small villages gave a blind eye to Imperial movements, yet had given spare food and supplies to the Stormcloaks. Taking Morthal would be as easy as defending it from following attacks.

“Keep in small groups. The ones who will follow me to Fort Snowhawk should all know how to use crossbows properly.”

Several troops armed with spears and crossbows promptly fell in by Ralof.

“The Dawnguard from Forebears’ Holdout will take their positions tomorrow morning. When they see us arrive by the bridge, they’ll begin shooting.”

8. *Ralof*

Looks of glee and joy, some of nervous excitement. But no fear.

“Remember that we aim only to inflict casualties on the Imperials. The war won’t end by crushing them at the Fort. The following day after our adventure, we will join the rest of you brothers in storming Morthal.”

Soft cheers, avoiding Imperial suspicions on the ruins.

“We move in an hour.”

And so an hour passed. A warm breeze made its way from the Sea of Ghosts into Hjaalmarch swamps. Warm mixed into cool, fog formed over the hold, no one saw more than a few feet ahead. Ralof had heard of tales about the fog and the swamps. Ghosts, spectres, disappearances, vampires. Even the Dragonborn had dealt with unnatural events here. An old friend of his also kept to herself a few steps from Labyrinthian. She had met an old man in Morthal at times for drinks and talk. Ralof had heard of some struggle against vampires in the north. Whatever had happened, at least they would not the Storm-cloaks there in the fog.

He wondered if he could meet old friends, dead battle-brothers, long-lost parents, the fog and Shor willing. He and his sister knew only themselves and the log mill they worked so hard to keep after so many generations. That, and Shor’s mercy.

The party of crossbows, spears, and axes trudging between snow-banks, into fog, avoiding pitfalls. No skill for fancy swords, no material for stable halberds. The Dragonborn was kind enough to make schematics for cheap crossbows, enough to pierce mail. The Legion and its allies preferred sturdy steel mail. Ulfric had wised enough to prioritize gambesons and jerkins. Ralof knew he was thankful for it. The cold bit less and he could survive more arrows. At least enough till he could place one in a legionary.

The road ahead lay hidden in fog and snow, yet the party knew their

way well. True sons of Skyrim knew the snow better than anyone. Ralof thought of his childhood days playing in snow with Gerdur. Flying snowballs, Saturalia gifts, winter warmth by the hearth. New warmth and life with her now husband. She always had eyes for that Hod, back in Riverwood, even back in those days. Fathers and wives had their place. His was here, deep in Hearthfire without a hearth.

Night fell, and the wolves would begin their hunts soon. Low cliffs hung out to their left. Ralof whistled to his men.

“We camp there for tonight. Need rest for the morning program.”

They moved onto the clifftop and they let down their packs and bags. Less tired men moved to set up tents and barricades, bedrolls and camouflage. The rest went about eating and drinking. Ralof took out salted goat jerky, plentiful from all the wild goats roaming by mountainside. A good warrior needed a good body, and a good body needed good food. Sleep, rest, drink, all important for a man in fight and file. Morning tomorrow would see their effect.

And morning came in an autumn snowstorm. No sight of sun, no view of road, all view of snow and shelter. Ralof’s tent shook and his equipment frosted. Some men outside called out to him, wishing for orders.

“Keep inside. The Dawnguard should still be in their holdout with this weather.”

Wailing wind kept for what seemed like half a day. Its end let the sun out, still climbing upward. Ralof and the party took to cleaning their frosted gear, the cold making their wear worse in battle. They hurried a hideout for their tents and they hastened to the Snowhawk.

Some of the party swore their luck, by the Nine or Talos or Stendarr or Shor. A quarter day stuck in tents had ruined weeks of war. Ralof could say nothing but kept steady march ahead. Talos could not hold back a snowstorm, but maybe the other Eight had something up their

8. *Ralof*

sleeves.

Snowbanks surrounded the Snowhawk past the river with no saviors, only the Stormcloaks the arriving party. Convenient camouflage while the legionaries sorted out fort matters. Shovels and spades, their clash with snow broken by the Stormcloaks clashing with crossbows.

“The Dawnguard may be here any moment,” Ralof encouraged. “Ys-mir Talos be praised for this snowstorm.”

Men from the fort went to the road and took to their bows and loosed upon the Stormcloaks’ cover. Ralof flinched a little before taking aim and downing an archer. Smarter legionaries brought out shields and formed a shieldwall. Their foes marching upward, Ralof signalled to nearby brothers.

“Focus on one man at a time. Disrupt their formation.”

The legionaries’ march fell prey to their own discipline. Stumble after stumble, pause after pause. A lucky moment let a Stormcloak take out an exposed legionary. The shieldwall kept frozen under crossbow volley. Ralof signed to a few axemen, who nodded.

“Skyrim belongs to the Nords!”

The 60 strong ran downriver toward a gap in Fort Snowhawk’s walls. Crossbows kept overwatch, exchanging shots with garrison men. The shieldwall retreated step by step, the fort’s position almost compromised.

“Turn!” Ralof ordered. At his command, the axemen fell upon the legion shieldwall. Brazen beatings and horrid hits, men of the garrison helpless under snow and crossbow.

“Into the fort, burn anything you see.”

The party stormed past barricades, some falling to legion archers. The keep lay helpless save a barred door. Legionaries tumbled and tripped on the snow, mere practice targets to rushing Stormcloaks.

“Keep out you dogs,” a voice rang from inside. “We sons of Skyrim remain true to Tiber Septim’s Empire.”

Ralof looked around the courtyard. “Throw their drink to the keep walls. Mix in some straw and hay. Light it in fire.”

Their cocktails ready, the party started a fire to weaken the keep. Screams and wails rang from inside.

“You call yourselves sons of Skyrim, yet burn your own countrymen alive,” the voice echoed again.

“We do what we must for Skyrim.”

The party gathered again, the blaze spreading throughout. From the West, infantry clad in black appeared over a slope.

“You Dawnguard are late.”

A blonde nord in maroon brigandine spoke up. “Keep your neck covered, Stormcloak. We’re lucky the snowstorm came when it did.”

“We’ll need to get to Morthal fast,” an Orc said. “The Frozen-Heart should have begun by now.”

“Aye. We head out by the Sun’s downing.”

Noon came and went. A quick lunch from captured fort provisions and Dawnguard rations. Then they went out to join the storming.

Hadvar

Tur-das, 15 Hearthfire

“Why would you need to besiege Morthal? It’s barely more than a glorified fishing village.”

Hadvar fumed in his Dreamsleeve communique. His remnants from the Whitewatch had kept watch over Windstad village, haunted by the Sea of Ghosts. Reinforcements from the Pale and Dragon Bridge, even Poenitus Oculatus infiltrators could not break the Stormcloaks’s spirits in Morthal. Past reports had shown grizzled bodies hung over cliff-sides, severed heads mounted by swamps.

“Tribune, we’re under too much pressure as it is.” The Legatus, Taurinus Duilis kept a scowl. “The queen, excuse me, jarl, wouldn’t listen to my reports of movement by those old ruins on the border with Whiterun.”

“But what’s keeping you around the city?”

“It’s the rebels from the ruin. Their cannons have been keeping our men away many steps from even a good siege camp.”

“Cannons? You think Hammerfell has a hand in this?”

“Keep geopolitics for the Elder Council. We need to find a way to neutralize their defenses before Whiterun falls.”

“Aye. I’ll see if I can help there.”

Hadvar awoke and found a foggy morning. Another snowstorm maybe, or just a flurry. No matter with how much progress the Stormcloaks had gained. He had seen the reports. The Stormcloaks had broken into the Wind District, and the fighting there over two days had seen more bodies than in the first week of the assault. Whose

bodies, no one knew. A few giants strewn by Kynareth's Gildergreen. Some dunmer who slipped to the Skyforge and died to arrows from the Cloud District. The Wind District itself remained mostly in loyalist hands. Mostly.

"Testudinem formate," Hadvar ordered.

A solid mass of shields facing him. Cavalry taking positions by the flanks. Plain, solid ground keeping them level. This would fail in Hjaalmarch's swamps, Hadvar realized.

"Centurion."

"Aye, Tribune."

"From now on, keep the century in ten groups, eight men each."

"Tribune?"

"An old practice. We can't beat the Stormcloaks in such tight formations."

"But the drills, Tribune."

"Will be an acceptable use of our time here." Boots stomped at a distance. More recruits.

"Aye."

"Get the other centurions here. We'll have the men be looser than a river at its bends."

Hadvar oversaw them through the week. All the bump and soothe. Recruits stumbling to their squads. Stumbling back to a shieldwall. Repeated for 12 hours, seven days. The next saw started off smoother. Each squad knew now fast movement. Dispersion in movement, cohesion in combat. The Stormcloaks kept loose and broken, till they melded in a tight and strong formation in their raids. General Tullius himself had tried it in Darkwater Crossing. Hadvar thought of their prisoners. The horse thief, no innocent but innocent of Ulfric's crimes.

9. *Hadvar*

The Dragonborn. A long way from Cyrodiil, Hadvar had said. Then in body, now in mind and soul too.

“Imperium lex est.”

“Lex sacra est.”

A nearby centurion and his unit dealing in routines and formations. Their movements went quicker, more precise. Hadvar allowed a smile in full view of the recruits, returning to Windstad’s manor afterward.

“Any news, Legatus?”

The Dreamsleeve began in a flash of color. Legatus Duilis appeared in front of a fort, its keep burnt and broken.

“Only what you should have known about your home hold’s capital.”

Hadvar’s face flushed, and his hand wavered.

“They’ve taken the Wind District. The Dragonborn himself led the final action.”

Hadvar’s legs shook, only to realize that his body remained normal in the Dreamsleeve. Fear gave nothing to help their situation.

“We expect your forces to get to Morthal at this instant, Tribune.”

“Yes, Legatus.” Hadvar could respond with nothing else. Orders were orders.

Another flash of colors. Hadvar awoke to the scent and warmth of manor hearth, his surviving officers gathered. One of them, his plumed helmet singed, stepped forward to support his Tribune.

“What luck we?”

“Just enough, Metilius.” Hadvar chuckled. “We need to get to Morthal now.”

“Now?”

Murmurs and whispers. Hadvar cleared his throat, the news still

a shock yet orders still orders. “The troops haven’t been perfectly trained. Nonetheless, our presence may tip the scales to the Legion’s favor.”

“We’ll need to collect local militiamen and warriors.” Prefect Ortho kept his view outside, probably seeking loyal villages nearby.

“You’re right there, Ortho. Take a century and start collecting centuries.”

“Aye.” A hurried walk to the best trained century, now to boast their mettle to impressed youth.

“The rest of you bring your own men in dispersed order to the Kjenstag outpost. We ought to meet in two or three days’ time.”

“Aye,” everyone affirmed.

“Metelius, get ready.”

The Tribune and his first spear moved ahead of their file, color and circumstance mixing with snowy simmer to the men’s amazement. Already, stomp and march rang from a long distance ahead. Hadvar looked at his men, all willing to fight for a far-off dream, white-gold in glamor rising above men’s excess and extremes to stand against corrupted elves in dominion. Such small folk every legionary was, yet all served to keep Skyrim in her best son’s Empire.

“The Legatus has asked that we march on Morthal and return it to the Empire. You have trained all week for this.”

Whispers, some cheers, all uncertainty. Hadvar needed to break the news.

“Whiterun’s Wind District has fallen.”

More murmurs, louder and stronger. Hadvar raised a hand for quiet.

“Morthal could share the same fate of our brothers there, lying dead as their last life flows out. Or we could come to Morthal’s rescue and

9. *Hadvar*

give our men relief from Skyrim's traitorous sons."

An echo of whispers, transformed into cheers and encouragement. Hadvar smiled.

"We march on Morthal. Get to your units and meet up in Kjenstag."

The cheers and orders came, as they always did before a march. Hadvar sighed. If their glee would stand the long march, the swampy soil, the bite of cold or wolf, then the fight to come and the siege to fight would be their last test.

And so they marched in singe of snow, in bite of cold, in press of swamp, nights and flurries taking men every so often. The fallen had their rest from kind villages, willing to spare space and time for graves. Three days' journey took four for Hearthfire drew to a close and the weather started taking a stormier face.

At last they chanced an ancient ruin decorated with fresh Imperial banners, tents, armories, chatter of troop and bark of officer. The auxiliaries had arrived first, local weather and environ never too hostile for hardy locals. Barricades and watch posts littered their surroundings, Ortho's handiwork manifest. Hadvar had caught him in laborer's rags. He shared a short encouragement before heading to a tent set up inside.

"A meal, Tribune."

"Thank you, and my regards to Ortho."

The legionary bowed and went his course. Potatoes, leeks, and salted goat jerky, what could have been his last meal. Hadvar took each bite in stride, savoring the flavor. Combat never gave chance for meals. Spears and arrows and swords kept getting in his way for that.

An auxiliary brought out a lute, giving much needed cheer that night. "We drink to our youth and to days come and gone."

"For the age of aggression is just about done."

Hadvar stopped resisting. His tent was too lonely anyhow. “We’ll drive out the Stormcloaks and restore what we own.”

“With our blood and our steel we will take back our home.”

The night aged on, embers dying, fires smoldering, drink and food resting whether in bellies or storeboxes. Hadvar kept quiet vigil on his cot, watching stars move through his tent till sleep took him.

Morning rose and so did troops in furor of hunger and excitement. A quick meal, enough to sustain a day of fighting. Hadvar climbed on a courser, strong and light enough to trudge through snow. He raised a hand in salute for the Empire. “Imperium lex est.”

“Lex sacra est,” his legionaries replied. His auxiliaries knew no Imperial, save in services for the Divines. What luck the gods had given them, for no sight of cloud went that morning.

The legionaries dispersed, each squad taking to beaten paths, unused roads, forested waysides. Hadvar went to the cavalry, moving through forest by roadside. He knew where the Stormcloak cannon lay, preventing the siege from breaking through. A dragon mound overlooking Morthal, an entire day’s walk from Kjenstag. Their steeds could make the distance faster, yet spotters needed daytime for best spotting.

The Labyrinthian came in view as the cavalry reached the main highway. Stormcloaks crawling back and forth, an effective outer wall blocking the path to Fort Snowhawk. Loyalist troops had no shelter save light tents, the Fort ransacked and pillaged and burned.

“Hold till sundown.”

“Aye.”

“And Metelius, be careful in the first charge later.”

A nod, and the 400 cavalry kept hidden among snow and tree. A Stormcloak would pass by, letting out or just resting. Hadvar had to

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rein in eager heroes. No hero would save them when their plan bungled up. The cannon's flash and report in the distance kept reminder for them. Past noon, the sun would climb down, night's throes seeping into the sky. Flash of powder continued for a while. Then it stopped, and after a while it sounded quiet.

The cavalry had slept after lunch, their position more quiet with no one awake. The last shot shook them awake. They hurried washing their faces, and they lept toward their foes' camp.

No cheer or cry rang for surprise. Only thundering hooves and screaming men, the lance taking their thoughts to Aetherius. Bodies littered the cavalry's path, the signal sounded too late just as the cannon had fallen into ruin.

Horses moved onto the stockade blocking loyalist movement. The men there heard their enemy, nocking too late as they met a lance's end. Splinters flew in the melee and sparks shone in the withdrawal. Hadvar had few memories of such thrill. They headed just before the swamps, a cavalry mage lighting a signal for attack. A similar signal flashed beyond, and the battle began.

They darted back near the cannon camp where the auxiliaries had started advancing. A frenzied mass throwing themselves into a shield-wall, disciplined by Stormcloak standards. The cavalry thrust into them, and they broke. No valor or mettle mattered against a hammer struck into one's back. The auxiliaries made short work of stragglers.

"Rally to me," Hadvar ordered. "Forward to the Labyrinthian."

They went in a steady march, legionaries from other groups joining them in front. Their goal rested behind strong walls, a maze to dungeons repurposed for a new rebellion. Hadvar knew the stories. A cult that betrayed men for their own ends. A battlemage who usurped the throne to spread misrule in eight corners. Now, a rebellion to split the Snow Tower kingless, bleeding. Hadvar could take out the rebels'

largest asset here, move to Whiterun with Taurinus's forces. Yet his aim fell short to an arrow from the ruins' walls, finding his shoulder and throwing him to the ground.

"Tribune!"

Metelius hurried to his side, arrows tearing his cape to tatters. A squad of legionaries hurried to them shield raised. Hadvar could only grunt, standing up and drawing his sword. Their shieldwall moved forward with the auxiliaries following. No sign of the other cavalry. Movement to their left. Hadvar turned and saw Ortho with his century.

"Gods damn you, should've told me."

"We should head for Morthal. Taurinus started moving in."

"Already?"

"Our men moved across the river after him. The town should be ours by morning."

"Is that where our cavalry went?"

"We can take the Labyrinthian after we've rested. We've taken out many of them already."

Hadvar grimaced. A single ruin didn't decide the war. He sighed.

"Rally to Morthal. Take it back for the Empire."

The shieldwall kept tight, keeping rear guard against any pursuit. An auxiliary drew Hadvar's horse to him. A brief thanks, then a gallop to join the march back.

Lines of shield had already forced their way into the town, fighting by the streets and docks in its most furious. Rebel banners draped Highmoon Hall, where the Jarl should live. Lines of houses dotted the legion's path to the docks and bridge. Hadvar's cavalry cheered the arriving Tribune, their glee not broken one bit by the journey, the

9. *Hadvar*

charges, the fighting. Hadvar smiled.

“Circle to the docks, then take them from behind. We’ll break them then join the men across the bridge.”

More cheers. Brothers they were, sons of Skyrim against prodigals. True heirs to Tiber Septim’s dream of an Empire spreading peace and security. His voice used in proper place, unlike Ulfric or the so-called Dragonborn. Tiber Septim had a dragon’s true courage, true honor.

The cavalry smashed into the rebel shieldwall, desperate stragglers jumping into the water. Hadvar’s archers made short work of them. The men had dispersed into groups and surrounded rebel positions, forcing surrender or a last stand. The herbalist store on the docks remained the last place of resistance. The boats behind it lay overturned, so no rebel could escape.

Hadvar stepped forward and cleared his throat. “Surrender now, and we will treat you with the Emperor’s mercy.”

“Our only mercy shall be Sovngarde.”

“So be it.”

He nodded to a nearby mage, who casted orange light. At once, a ruckus started inside. It went on for what seemed hours to Hadvar. Crashing bottles, breaking furniture, crashing swords and spears. At last, the last straggler went out in mayhem. An archer made short work of him.

Hadvar left their bodies to the priests of Arkay. Morthal had seen action ill-suited to a small, sleepy town. His deeds, however, would reach halls of great kings in song and verse. Or so he wished. No cheers for Empire or Skyrim as the sun rose. Only murmurs and grunts as each took his station, resting.

Galmar

Tir-das, 13 Hearthfire

Two winged forms swooping in to the city ahead, flame and fury unleashed on defenders aware yet unable. The middle of Hearthfire had given the Stormcloaks many boons, all more than making up for Dawnstar's bargained loss on table, Winterhold's disgruntled turned legionaries. The Imperial reinforcements down north had retreated, and Morthal had been taken as a distraction. Only the Wind and Cloud Districts remained before the liberation could move into other holds. Galmar smiled, watching over men pouring into Whiterun to fortify their foothold.

"My King," he started. "The Dragonborn says he's ready to launch another assault."

"Give him the go ahead."

"I'll join him in a while."

"Wait till he reaches the Cloud District."

Galmar's face twisted. "And let him do all the fighting?"

"You're too valuable to the war effort. The Dragonborn pledged his life. The gods have favored him throughout his short time here."

"If Shor wishes my life to restore His worship, and of His Son Talos, then I don't see why we shouldn't offer it."

Ulfric grimaced. "The Dragonborn may have thought willy schemes, but you handle the most important parts of war. Logistics. Morale. Leadership. Training. Diplomacy."

"And I ought to bring their fruits to harvest."

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Ulfric looked sidewise, his face unmoved. “They say a man once looked his entire life for Sovngarde, failing and despairing.”

“Then some giants squished him and he now feasts for eternity.”

“You have to be careful, old friend. Sovngarde may not be yours to take today.”

“Until then, my life belongs to your cause.”

Ulfric nodded. “When you get in there, keep watch for the Dragonborn’s voice.”

Galmar grinned. “My pleasure, your majesty.”

Galmar trudged through beaten plains and singed grass into farmland untouched since the siege began. Pelagia’s farm, its two farmhands still maintaining the place. They had traded many rations to the Stormcloaks. Even with victory uncertain. When the Liberation would have ran its course, Pelagia would be pleased at their shrewdness.

Makeshift staircases and ramps now connected the lower guardhouse to the upper. Wind District archers could do a number on moving troops. Galmar went through the stables, ignoring the stench and neighs. The gatehouse itself left only melted stone and ashes uncleaned. They had removed what was left of the corpses there weeks ago, melted flesh and charred bone a light burden. Past the gatehouse lay what remained of Warmaiden’s, burned by a stray Imperial magic blast. Adrienne Avenecchi kept pounding on her anvil, Galmar’s presence ignored. He shook his head and carried forward.

Rows of houses, burnt or singed or even frozen in the Dragon raids. The troops had stacked corpses next to each other, letting the undead dragon make them thralls. That must have been why he saw great fires many nights, Galmar thought. Imperials burning bodies to avoid them being enthralled and used against them.

The occasional arrow took flight near him. Another arrow flew back, inviting crossbows against the Wind District archer. An officer's cloak gave too much attention. Galmar had shed his for an ordinary nose-helm. A poor man's helmet, not one an officer would wear. Exactly as the Imperial's thought.

The Bannered Mare lay on the road's end, a half-hour's walk from the gatehouse. A spotter kept to a balcony room, giving instructions to dunmer mages where to cast spells at. Galmar saw a shard of ice appear by the market, thrown to a far-off watchtower. A figure there clutched his shoulder, slumping downward. He would die soon, Galmar thought. He shook his head and entered.

A party of warriors, dressed in many armors from many groups. Stormcloaks, Dawnguard, Companions, Housecarls, Skaals, all that the Dragonborn had helped no doubt. The man himself stood near a city map, discussing attack points with men in Wolf Armor and a woman in olden armor. Jorrvaskr's holders. Galmar stepped in, the floorboards creaking. They all turned to him, giving a short nod. The Dragonborn turned and smiled.

"We've been expecting you, Housecarl."

"Aye, Junius. How goes planning?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. Just brushing up final nuances."

"Hope you'll save some time to brush up the wreckage later on."

The Dragonborn grinned. "There might be too little than you'd expect."

"Imperials and your schemes."

A few chuckles. Junius stepped aside, the map in full view. Destruction spells around the walls, some heavier on a few sections to telegraph an assault. When the Imperials have concentrated there, the assault would commence near the main gatehouse. Their handi-

10. Galmar

work, Galmar's, Junius's, and Ulfric's.

"How do we break through the barricades once we start? We lost the ram."

"I'll do it myself."

"You scheme like an Imperial but fight like a Nord."

"My High King fights for Nords, after all."

"Heh." Galmar took a nearby bottle of mead. Two figures cast shadows outside, flame and fury raining once more. A trumpet sounded, followed by a herald's announcement in the market. Ulfric's banner-men had arrived.

"Hope your vacation in the Wind District was relaxing," Galmar said.

"Enough to make us think a little, Housecarl."

The Dragonborn's eyes perked. "Prisoner exchange?"

"Ulfric sent out some officers for their lives. All thanks to you of course."

"They should be dead in a while."

"What—"

"Remember the wine I gave them on the way? I spiked them with Potions of Frenzy."

"Imperial bastard."

"It was their lives or the bannermen's."

Galmar sighed. The Liberation needed ugly things done, yet sometimes he wished Junius let out a little candor in explaining them.

"Bygones be bygones. You've told the dunmer to prepare?"

"They already have. Expect the strikes in a little while."

“Aye.”

Galmar stepped back outside. Smoke had started airing from the Wind District, more than the ones he had seen during past nights. He swore he heard the clash of steel and the scream of men and the roar of undead. A miracle that no outbreak had started. Rumbling sounded behind him. A file of giants, armored trolls, their handlers and escort. Loosed bowstrings and crossbows echoed in the distance. He turned to the boundary wall. It had been used solely as a boundary. The makeshift scaffolding behind it would let only a few dozen take watch, loose lucky arrow strikes, fall prey to flames. The Imperials had not expected a war this early, only skirmishes and raids. Never the Liberation’s entire effort focusing on their central position.

Squads of dunmer began gathering across the main road. Shieldwalls formed before them. A barrage of arrows from the garrison beyond, nothing since the earliest days of siege. Another Imperial host fallen to flames.

The deceptive casts blasted through the entire length of wall. Nothing strong enough to break it, but enough to rattle its defenders. Imperial counter-mage fire blasted through a few shieldwalls. Nothing enough to kill or maim. Only to distract or scare a few auxiliaries.

“Milk drinkers,” cried a few troops to cowering dunmer. Those who had taken the sign shook their head and went back into formation, loosing bolts and blasts to the boundary wall.

Galmar had noticed sections near the Bannered Mare more broken and blasted than any other. The Imperials must have thought the assault would follow through there. He wondered whether they caught on to the rest of the fire, in the other sections. Junius’s intentions would have been predictable. Or the Imperials thought them too predictable. Galmar spotted wards by the further gatehouse. Too predictable.

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The blasts carried on for an hour. Counter-fire continued too, taking its fair share of casualties. The arrows and bolts stopped, magic and spells having replaced them a half-hour into the exchange. Another rain of flame had fallen, and another raise of undead. Galmar wondered how many men each side had before all this. The Dragonborn had said the Imperials could raise 50,000 for Whiterun's defense. No civilians had helped in, even the Battle-born clan. House Gray-mane had kept in Riverwood after getting word. All Imperial casualties in the Plains District had either turned undead or burned to prevent turning. Galmar had also seen a tally of 7,000 Stormcloak dead in reports after the first week. Talos and Stuhn knew how many their assault would bring.

A door sounded behind Galmar. The party had left in stride, walking toward the gatehouse to be Skyrim's ram today. Someone on the walls pointed toward them. A barrage of arrows, met by dragonfire midair onto scaffolding. Charred wood birthing flame burning down legionaries' last hope of cohesive defense. Galmar turned to some dunmer and pointed toward the nearby gatehouse. Orders understood and casting hands, aiming flame and ice and shock to an Imperial structure overdue to collapse. Return casts from ahead, wards breaking under sheer strength of shots exchanged from squandered soils singed and sundered. No valor or mettle could live save for Nordic courage coming from curse of Talos caving over Imperials, coats turned while Thalmor intrigues carve new crafts to crash their tower in Skyrim. No man or mer could stand such craze, coming close to home with the war. Galmar sought no greater honor than to fight this battle and win or attain Sovngarde otherwise.

Galmar scrambled for his centurion's whistle, long unused since his last Imperial encounter. A short blow, alerting present troops.

"A large enough party should stay here to present the Imperials their awaited gift. The rest of you, follow me."

Cheers and praises, to Galmar or Ulfric or to Talos and Shor and Skyrim. A thousand strong host kept watch as their chosen doom shuddered under their barrage. Galmar and his host scurried past the road, avoiding arrows and spells under a loose roof of shields and wards. Giants would throw stones at Imperial archers time to time, distracting them enough to cover Stormcloak movement below.

“All those joining, keep left to the houses. Hug the wall and move on.”

A crash rumbled from far behind. Splinters, shields, swords, spears. Sounds of an Imperial sally, like many over the siege’s course. Galmar paid no further heed as he neared the gatehouse. Enough mages had gathered to begin an exchange with garrisonmen from beyond. Some Dawnguard took to their crossbow and loosed bolts, the Housecarl’s safety paramount. A lucky arrow flew overhead Galmar, his breath stopping as he forced to the guard barracks.

“Some helm I wear if Imperials still spot me.”

“My men ought to be less protective of you.”

Junius had brandished his axe, one Galmar had never seen till he met the Dragonborn. Its blade shone a fine luster, matte from old dragon’s bones. Its enchantment gave a faint red hue from instilled magicka. Gods knew what fortune Balgruuf had paid or what souls fell for its creation.

“My thane, we should begin.” A woman with raven hair, ivory skin, and green-grey eyes in Wolf armor, similar to Junius’s.

“Of course, love.” He smiled. “Wait till our friends from above come.”

A mage in uniform from Winterhold casted a light, flung it upward. Two shadows darkened their ground, flame and ice and necrotic fear shining through into the Wind District. Galmar shielded his eyes, catching only a glimpse of their Imperial asset drawing an Elven bow.

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He nocked an arrow tipped with red, and loosed it to the sun. Galmar's heart skipped a beat when darkness swept outward, throes of twilight shadowing Whiterun early morning.

Junius cleared his throat, took a deep breath. STRUN BAH QO. Storm clouds again, lightning again, rain and death again amid a bloodcurled sky. Galmar watched as he approached the barricades alone, his shield raised. Anyone at guard had been taken out, whether by spell or bolt or thunder. The Dragonborn stood by the barricade as he focused his Voice. FUS RO DAH.

Twig and branch gave to splinter and shard, in time for another run of flame to burn everything behind their ruin. "For Skyrim!" Junius shouted.

"For Shor! For Talos!" Galmar replied. Cheers and war cries echoed, the charge pouring into the Wind District bitterly fought for since the siege had begun.

Vilkas

Tir-das, 13 Hearthfire

Vilkas kept to heart tales of Ysgramor, his youthful memories giving direction in a bloodied land. A band of companions marching under brotherhood and honor, fighting where roads lead them, taking which roads led them to fights. Mercenaries, conquering heroes, drunken louts, esteemed company, the Companions had never questioned why they fought. Only where they could draw their swords.

Vilkas allowed a smile from his youth's memories. He swung his longsword in remembrance through a legionary bereft of payment, of conquest, of esteem, of company, even of drink. This war had been futile to him and his brothers. Up until the Dragonborn came and took his place as harbinger. Vilkas kept his smile in thrusting through a legionary coming from behind. A quick thrust from his foe's shortsword, parried to bring his longsword to ox stance into Imperial steel, between gaps. No time to savor victory. Another parry to an officer and his longsword from the roof plowing past his foe's helm biting into shoulder. The street hugging the boundary wall hosted today's fight, their back-and-forth push and shove to Kynareth's Gildergreen.

Vilkas could tell of each site he passed. The Unbroken's home, whelp who killed whelp. Unbroken like his armor deflecting a shortsword before he broke his foe's nose with a pommel bash. Carlotta Valentia's house, pretty single mother. Not pretty enough to steal Vilkas's sight from his foe, now an orc berserker threatening their shieldwall. He took a strike and he lowered his sword like a fool for his foe could think only of offense. A strike came and the Companion swordsman evaded and he thrust into Orcish muscle past heart and lung through weak links in his mail. Imperial spearpoint found Vilkas's side and found

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answer by parry and sideward sweep across neck. The bloodcurled storm proved novel sight yet fighting never failed giving Vilkas novelty in foe or skill. Lightning strikes on his foe's armor always gave sight for glee, however.

Some Dawnguard and crossbowmen had started climbing what scaffold remained. Vilkas saw arrows and bolts overhead, wards futile as some dropped after bites in leg or knee. Vilkas growled and he bashed an auxiliary's helmet in. His foe collapsed and he stumbled forward yet found his balance to parry a Dunmer's mace and crack his chitin. His foe moved backward and a Nordic legionary rotated in with fury in his thrusts. Vilkas tapped his foe's shield and his foe overextended and Vilkas thrust into his face. The shieldwall heaved and hauled till a figure over head crashed into the Imperials.

"Some flying pet we have," Vilkas said.

The dragon tossed and bit and he thrashed and threw flame. Over the distance, Vilkas spotted a squad of battlemages. Their hands glowing, chains kept the red dragon to the ground. An order sounded, the Imperials piling against Odahviing in their fury. Vilkas raised his hand and signed to the scene. A squad of axemen joined him and they raised against a legion shieldwall formed to protect their prize. This one showed discipline and Vilkas bounced against them in futile haste.

"Crossbows," he barked.

Bolts flew into Imperial rows still maintaining tight ranks forward to Vilkas's party. Ahead past the dragon's plight lay House Gray Mane, its dwellers safe in Riverwood on comfy beds, with warm food, in covered dwellings. Vignar's former comrades would gain all glory. Vilkas would thank him in Dragonsreach itself. Now, though, his focus kept to breaking through the shieldwall ahead.

A roar echoed from the far side, followed by men's screams. Aela must have turned to break the sally. Vilkas waved for a Dawnguard

crossbowman.

“Get some explosives against them.”

“Ten minutes, Sire.”

“We’ll hold them off till then.”

The legion shieldwall had started marching up, reclaiming their lost ground. Local auxiliaries led their advance, axes falling from their formation’s safety, spears keeping friends from aid, shortswords securing their pace. Vilkas thrust his sword upward, roaring. His men roared with him, everyone charging in axes and swords, hammers and spears. Vilkas gored an auxiliary cowering in the shieldwall, its gaps no small obstacle yet small enough to hide the foe’s gore. His shieldman cast forward thrusting into Vilkas but the swordsman’s armor blocked it and he gripped his blade and he crashed his pommel into his foe’s arm. The legionary grasped his arm and he dropped his sword and the Companions’ swordmaster executed him through his neck.

Vilkas gripped his blade and he parried an axe stroke and he speared his foe. He grasped his blade and crashed his pommel on a legionary’s helmet, his foe stumbling backward breaking cohesion. A gap formed and the Stormcloak host wedged itself in it for breaking the shieldwall would help their explosives break through. Vilkas charged against looser legionaries scrambling for defense. He could fight all day yet his vision failed for a battlemage had begun calling a flame storm on them. Singed flesh, boiling blood, blinded vision. Vilkas stumbled backward till his back met broken bodies and bones and broken men wavering. His sight cleared and he greeted a charging auxiliary formation. Bolts halted their advance and Vilkas looked to the scaffolding above. The Dawnguard had come.

“Aim for their center,” he ordered.

Crafted bolts imbued with magicka and saltpeter and sulfur, all bearing on loyalist forces across the Wind District. Blasts rang and bits

11. *Vilkas*

flew whether wood or steel or clothing or flesh. Vilkas charged in and rallied his men and they cut down survivors. He did so while shouts of force and flame rumbled nearby. The battlemages saw and they fled toward the Gildergleen. The Dawnguard readied yet they would not shoot for smoke had gathered around the once captive dragon, now retreating skyward. Vilkas growled and bade his nearby men with a wave.

“After the battlemages. Avenge our fallen brothers.”

“For Skyrim!”

The host charged through bodies, through rubble, past House Gray Mane into roads beside. An Imperial barricade had formed, scrambling from the recent skirmish. The smoke had cleared and Vilkas saw their engineers, their reforming battlemages, their regrouping legionaries and auxiliaries. Dawnguard bolts flew overhead into them, and the Companions’ finest grinned. He raised his sword in a roof stance and the host charged to the fray. Splintered shields, shaken spears, sword spewing red under a red day, stormy as the Stormcloaks stormed the barricade. Vilkas and his host cut a swath into loyalist body, another run of flame dousing their treacherous brothers behind, deeper into the Wind District. The Battlemage Palatine drew a bound sword and prepared a final firestorm to take them with him. Vilkas leapt and he swung across the Palatine’s neck.

Bellows, grunts, rumbling and shaking. Vilkas turned and he saw their giants and trolls beginning to enter the Wind District. Force and flame of shout drew nearer, until a party of housecarls popped up in the intersection nearby. The Dragonborn had cleared his area. Vilkas smiled, waving to him. Junius waved back, his face stoic yet softening. A shout of undeath echoed, and the fallen all rose bearing their arms and armor. Another day of combat, another day of ruin.

The stormclouds above started clearing, sun’s first rays blinding

Vilkas. He saw smoke and flames further beyond, maybe by the gate near the Bannered Mare. Aela's howls rang some more and clash of steel echoed. The red dragon flew there and he let a blast of frost down. Cheers and wails mixing, sound of ice breaking and axe chopping. A bloody mess there, Vilkas thought.

Junius brought out an elven bow and aimed toward the sun. This time his arrow shone gold, visible as it flew. The sun then shone so bright that Vilkas thought it would kill him. It did not for it only killed some loyalists beyond. Scream of anguish. Wail of death. Another day of combat, another day of ruin.

Caius

Mid-das, 14 Hearthfire

Caius shuddered at the guardsman lying by the altar, his life bleeding out through his bandages. The Whiterun Guard Commander had promised his volunteers that they would win glory for Whiterun and the Empire. They won their glory yet they lost everything else.

Twelve of his boys, dead by Kynareth's Temple. No Stormcloaks had reached it, yet its grounds saw frustrated healers, unable medics, grieving brothers. Caius had seen little action in the Great War. Relaying between sieges, some skirmishes. The Eight knew how worse it was when the Imperial City had fallen. When Bravil had fallen. When Leyawiin had fallen. He now paid for those fallen souls in his own little way. Blasts and raining flame and turned undead clawing little by little into their remaining holdouts.

He had gone to Skyrim to seek a new life. A few adventures, some fights and brawls. He had gained enough knowhow to become a guard. Rise up the ranks and take care of the city's peace. A peaceful life, secure, enough pay for drink and food. The city's peace in times of war, even. So when he saw the red dragon swoop in and raze his city, his boys, Caius could only help himself to the watered down ale by the Temple meant to stop dysentery.

Sieges tended to go on for a while. This one fared no better. Caius kept vigil with his sword, resting only in sudden surges of sleep. He had sharpened it only a few times early on. Then he had started sharpening it more and more. Now he kept ritual of sharpening. A few guards looking tough had been enough to stop trouble. He wondered how many guards they would all need to stop the rebellion.

“Fireball overhead. Get down!”

A spurt of flame fell ahead, by the Gildergleen. The now-big sapling there could survive any flame. Caius knew that otherwise held for the legionaries stationed there. Barricades standing to stare the Stormcloaks into standing down, yet standing only to protect those who failed to stand from sulfurous singes, the siege’s sour spite afflicting Skyrim’s loyal sons and others helping out the most. They held the Wind District for now, but Caius knew that they would stop the Stormcloaks at the Gildergleen or the Stormcloaks would not stop till they had taken Dragonsreach.

“Danica,” he called to the priestess of Kynareth. “See if you can move the wounded to the Hall of the Dead.”

“I’d do that Caius, but we need some protection from the crossfire on the way.”

“I can do that.” He whistled and called for any guardsmen nearby. Only six in fit straits, four others with some sort of injury.

“Ulfric’s boys think they do you Nords a service by wounding and maiming you. We won’t see to that. The Empire never will. We’re shielding the temple members while they carry the patients to the Hall of the Dead.”

Some voices, mostly nods. The guards grabbed their shields and formed the best shieldwall they could by the street going to the Hall of the Dead. A stray arrow flew into it, sticking into a shield’s hide cover. Caius nodded at them, and he moved inside the temple.

“I can fight Sire. I can fight!”

A guardsman with an arm just about close to falling off, caught in the blasts yesterday. Caius rushed to him and helped him lie back down.

“Your duty has ended, guardsman. Stand down and rest.”

12. Caius

A sigh, and a flight into sleep. One that would lead him to that Nordic eternal feast, maybe. The healers did all they could. His arm could get better. Caius couldn't keep his mind on him, no matter how important each of the boys were. They served and maimed and got maimed for the city's safety. For the citizens' safety.

"Over here, Sire."

Some guardsmen loosing shots at a far off target. Some legionaries brought out wounded civilians, the first to find safety by Death's Hall. Stretchers and crutches, makeshift wheelchairs, a few beds mounted on wheels. A horror to defend with such few men.

"March," Caius ordered. The shieldwall moved slowly, letting the party of wounded catch up as arrows and fireballs and icicles flew overhead. Some lunatic mage in the Cloud District, no doubt. The Stormcloaks could give their all, yet they could not deny the guardsmen served in duty to the end without dishonor. Any more than what they gained by splitting Skyrim in half. Caius had found a new home here after years of idle poverty in Cyrodiil. Any man would hate any who had lit a fire on his hard-earned home.

The Hall of the Dead sat right in front of a street, straight enough for someone to loose a shot across. Loyalist barricades kept strong, manned by what auxiliaries and legionaries remained. Caius held a shield to the Hall's door while legionaries guided the wounded inside. Stray Stormcloak fire always reached somewhere it shouldn't, Caius thought. Even a rock thrown too hard could mess up their defense. He knew firsthand, when a guardsman fell while they carried some supplies to the Plains District. The baggage tainted by his blood and bits, starving men surrendered to their capture. Such horrors Caius never saw till later life in his new home.

"Civilians are all in, Captain," a legionary said.

"Excellent job." Caius hummed in thought. "Don't bring the casu-

alties in yet. They need more time to heal before they can even get up.”

“Aye, but the Gildergleen could fall any time.”

“By that time the men would recover enough to help defend.”

The legionary nodded and they headed back to the Temple. They arrived just as the singe of fire and clash of sword and bellow of giant neared.

“Shor’s bones,” a guard swore.

“To the barricades, boys. Don’t let Ulfric’s dogs get here.”

A rain of arrows came, caught by the Gildergleen’s leaves. Nords would have thought Kynareth really did so, Caius thought. What luck she must have brought to the city to spare a few arrows their targets.

Caius readied his shield as the noise drew closer. He thought he saw an arrow and braced himself. Only a head, too bloodied to be recognized as such. Loud bellowing, screams and shame, foul smoke smelling sour from ash and death. Caius heard cries of ‘n’wah’ and ‘fetcher’ rang off before loud blasts. Guts and bits hit Caius’s shield, sparing his face. Lifting it down, he looked on a Legion shieldwall holding back axes and halberds and pollaxes bearing on them. Caius nodded to some men, who started loosing into the crowd. A roar answered their defense and a large axe fell upon the shieldwall, surviving only by a battlemage’s ward. The next strike brought them to knees, arrow after arrow only annoying the giant which fell upon them.

“Fall back!” Caius ordered. “To the roads, face the Gildergleen.”

The legionaries scrambled back, arrows holding the giant back till a blast of flame fell onto the defenders. A lone man tripped and he scurried backward and the giant raised his axe to strike. Caius rushed in and he pulled the man sideward and the strike hit the ground, staggering the giant. Another round of arrows and Caius and the men headed

12. Caius

to the road leading to the Hall of the Dead. A shieldwall and rushed barricades. The dunmer auxiliaries headed by the Old Gods' Temple, up the stairs toward Jorrvaskr. Archers followed, some soldiers with ladders and ropes and hooks, a few crossbowmen. Rain after rain bearing down, taking legionaries and guards unawares. Caius spotted a black-dressed crossbowman move up to the Gildergleen. Caius shouted and he pointed at him. A volley nipped the black-armored, his crossbow and powdery bolts dropping, the man falling back to safety. The giant passed by the tree and he prepared a lunge. A bolt of flame, directed to his feet, and the powdery bolts exploded. Caius had never seen such gore.

"Get to Jorrvaskr and cleanse the place," Caius ordered.

The loyalists charged amid shock and frost and flame onto the fore, rebel archers falling to their swords. Caius overstepped against a chitin-armored dunmer and he tripped to the elf's spear but he stepped sideward and he inched his shortsword into a slit in his foe's helmet. Just as they readied for the Skyforge a storm of flame erupted beyond the Gildergleen. Rebels shouted to retreat and regroup, their dragons covering their flight with raining shouts and undead fodder. Caius grinned and his party charged to the Skyforge. The dunmer took out a legionary and three guardsmen, and both of them fell to Caius and an auxiliary.

Whiterun would see another day in Imperial hands.

Sylgja

Lore-das, 17 Hearthfire

Bed-wife of the Dragonborn, not a very prestigious title. Yet one near and dear, Sylgja mused. Breezehome escaped no damage, yet still stood clean despite the ruckus outside. A comfier life than in Darkwater Crossing, definitely. Food by the fire spit, drink by the table, books by the shelves undisturbed through magic. No one would have known a battle happened outside just a few weeks ago.

Sylgja wore a loose dress, unthinkable with Frostfall so near. Breezehome was warm enough, she thought. She would savor Junius's warmth too, in time. Sparks flickered from the mutton roast. She turned it around, still too rare. A Skyrim, free for all to give thanks to Shor and the old gods for his bounties on them. A wonderful thought, now turning real just outside. She smiled. Long straits ahead, yet never long enough for her parents to find freedom from the Thalmor's harassment. Her children to live without fear of a justiciar stalking their every move.

A knock by the door, and it opened. A woman took off her wolf-styled helmet. Lydia sighed and smiled.

"It's freezing out there."

"Dragons didn't light a fire?"

"Too busy snacking."

"Nine Divines." They both laughed.

The mutton roast gave a savory meal, tinged by slight bitter burn and a sour-salty undertaste. Junius had learned the technique in the Legion. A quartermaster's tricks, Sylgja thought. Trying to make the

13. *Sylgja*

best out of what he had. Darkwater Crossing had given enough comfort. Her mining work in Shor's Stone had been hard, but even with the war life kept generous. Then she had tripped and hurt her leg. The Dunmer priest Eranmur had healed her, yet Junius had helped her out in many ways. Teaching her what he had learned in the Legion. Helping her optimize her operations. Fixing up Shor's Stone to prevent future accidents. Hard work was hard, but easing things sometimes gave more. She smiled, taking another biteful of mutton.

"You're really comfy in that dress?"

"I'll be busy later this evening."

"Now's not really a good time for that." Lydia sighed. "I think the war will go on for a while."

"My parents are safe in Eastmarch with the Stormcloaks out here." Sylgja smiled. "I don't mind taking things easy for now. Just need a little rest tonight."

"I should join you."

"My pleasure."

They both laughed, the late autumn breeze knocking at the windowsills, the chimney smoke showing their warmth, all away from the mayhem far outside. Sometimes a loud blast rang a faint echo inside. Sylgja would flinch, Darkwater and Shor's Stone much more quiet places. The city noises never appealed to her, yet Junius all made up for it. The battle would run its course, the Dragonborn would warm her again, the city would continue its daily bustle. Skyrim could heal, just as she did thanks to Eranmur.

"Wonder how we'll turn out," Sylgja said.

"Old and fat, with a hundred kids."

"Not all of them mine I guess."

A laugh. “We’ll be stuck in one of those manor halls we have in some far-off hold.”

“More room for them to grow.” Sylgja smiled. “Less noise there too.”

“You’d think that was a bad thing.”

“The city’s fine.” Sylgja sipped her tea. “But I miss the old quiet back home.”

“Guess the noise from the ambush was low a price after all.”

“Yeah.” Sylgja breathed out. “What will you do when the war ends, war-wife?”

“I’ll get myself a new spear.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Need new equipment to carry more burdens.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll be alright for peace and quiet, too. Divines know I miss my young days hanging out in Dragonsreach.”

“Your young days were barely two years ago.”

“War forces people to grow up fast.” Lydia chuckled.

“Fair.”

“I was such a young maiden then. Sixteen, fresh out of arms training.”

“I guess your wits were already yours even then.”

“You guess right.”

“Well, I’m in charge of Breezehome after all.”

“Only till the battle ends.”

“And it will be a glorious short reign.”

The two women laughed while the fire stoked in winter’s embrace

13. Sylgja

drawing Skyrim closer to months of fear and frost amid battle and burden. Sylgja yawned as she climbed upstairs, full and sated. She needed only a short wait. Junius would rest from battle. All warriors needed rest before they could fight. She needed her rest too, from the cold and the fear and the turmoil outside. Only love and calm and warmth that night awaited.

Galmar

Morn-das, 19 Hearthfire

“Any news from the last assault?”

“We managed to wrestle House Grey-Mane from the Imperials.”

The Dragonborn rested on a hammock drawn between his home and the blacksmith’s besides. He kept a plate of olives on his belly, eating them one after the other. A queasy sight amid the battle’s queasiness.

“We need to get another one ready soon. Our troops in Morthal keep reporting Imperial movement this, Imperial movement that. Shor’s heart blast them to Oblivion if they keep doing more than be a distraction to keep them away from us.”

“Give me a second, Galmar.”

Alduin’s slayer drooped his legs out of his hammock and he placed the olive plate beside him. Skyrim’s hero in his full array of armor and arms. He breathed in. HUN KAAL ZOOR. Three spectres appeared in front of him.

“We serve the Dragonborn,” a bearded figure said.

“What must we fulfill here?” an armored woman said.

“Ever at your service, Worldeater’s Bane,” a man half-blinded said.

“I’m in a battle, and I need you three to help us cut through our foes.”

“Consider it done, Dragonborn.” The bearded figure smiled. “Point us to where you need our blades.”

“He,” Junius pointed at Galmar, “will you tell you all the details.”

Three ghastly shapes looking at him. For all Galmar knew, these three had been mead hall carousers dressed in ancient robes for mirth.

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Only the Dragonborn's words made him know otherwise.

"We need to cut through these two gates to the Wind District."

A map laid on stone street, three spectres in silent study. House Gray Mane stood as sole Stormcloak ship among an Imperial sea. The forces there liable to being cut off at moment's notice.

"How long from the second gate to the Gildergleen?" the one-eyed leader asked.

"Around 15 minutes."

"Call in one of the dragons to lure them to our ourpost," the golden-hilt proposed. "Hit the Imperials from behind."

"Shor's bones," Galmar said. "We need to keep the troops from jumping in when they see the house surrounded by fire."

"Leave that one to me." Junius stepped in, the Whiterun warlady and the Solitude swordmaiden flanking him. Skyrim's finest now in finest gear, Jorrvaskr's Harbinger and the Stormcloaks' strategist wanting no small mettle for his dread might. "I'll rally the rowdier ones to hold till I let them loose."

"Such trust for Nirn's savior," the old robe said. "Yet I must wonder. Why bother with their vehemence than find skillful warriors, able to hold their fury till fate demands it?"

"Vehemence is the best a man could have." Galmar growled. "Our vehemence brought us to bear against Imperial oppression. Our vehemence may lie chained, whether by will or warleader, but vehemence unleashed shall carry the day to victory."

Clash of sword against shield amid cheer. "You speak well, Stonefist." The one-eyed took a spectral horn, spectral rumble echoing. "No warrior fights without fury. Come now, dragons and our best men," A sword drawn. "To the house beyond."

A muster of amused troops, gawking at spectres long dead yet finding no choice than to follow them. Another officer stood chuckling.

“We’re yet to receive our reinforcements from the Grey Quarter.”

“The old pointy-eared wizards and boney warriors will come, Gonnar.” Galmar coughed. “Their councilors promised them and a few Mara Tongue guys.”

“Never knew the Greybeards deal with Mara.”

“Or that Dunmer did too.” Galmar shook his head. “To the Wind District again, battle brothers,” Galmar shouted. “Even Sovngarde’s best aid our cause. Skyrim and Shor!”

Their best men, 20 in all, dashing amid another barrage of cannon and arrow and dragonflame, lifted by Kyne’s winds into the Wind District. Swears to Ysmir and Kyne and Tsun and Shor mixing with pleas to Talos and Stendarr and Shezarr, gods aiding their favored for favorable deeds falling in place for their glory. The Jarl had thought to place no cannons of their own to keep the Stormcloaks at bay. Balgruuf’s alarm at his city’s fill of assassins and spies falling away when the Dragonborn offered mediation. A city of a thousand hundreds dealing in trade and commerce, unalarmed till the bells rang in alarm of the Liberation coming to their doorsteps, now littered with blood of defender and attacker alike.

“Over here, Redorans!”

House Grey-mane now paid host to its first Dunmer visitors in an era, its ancient foundation now bearing current wood. The score of troops had sighted them climbing over to the Wind District, the pile of spearmer and sword blasting and hacking away at new Imperial barricades.

“We heard that you had taken the Wind District,” a sellsword in ashlander armor said.

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“We almost did,” Galmar answered. “The Dragonborn told you that?”

“Muthserah, Teldryn Sero wants to make best use of his clients’ pay.” Rumbling from the bombardment outside. “Muthsera Junius told me to be cautious in helping you lot. Helping out these Redoran lot in a daring raid will really make me more marketable to new ones.”

“He set you up training them and us though,” Gonnar said.

“Well a man of my skills should diversify my eggs in many baskets.”

“You’ll get more nests once our little adventure here ends.” Galmar moved to the next floor, the lass Olfina tending to her old uncle.

“By the gods, Galmar. You smell like roasted Aldmeri on Red Road.”

“Good to see you too.”

“I bet you want me out there with the younglings.”

“We need you to lead the city afterward.”

The door downstairs opened. Mumbles from old wizards and flowing robes.

“The pointy-ears downstairs will pave my carpet to Dragonsreach I guess.”

“Come now, Vignar. Whiterun could use your experience.”

“I bet the Companions are there too thanks to your special recruit.”

“Is this about Thorald?”

The lass shuddered. Vignar only sighed. “I can’t let the Thalmor do more to my brother.”

“Shor’s bones, I’ll have the Dragonborn speak to you about him.”

“What? What does the new harbinger have to do with my nephew?”

“Quiet for now. Come now, wizards.”

Several Dunmer in House Telvanni's raiments walked up, taking positions by the windows. The cannon fire outside had grown in noise.

"What's the plan?" Teldryn shouted from below.

"Get the loyalists' attentions by blasting away at the Cloud District. When they spot the house, blast away any legionaries who think going to use is a good idea."

"You heard the snowskin. Start blasting around that huge palace over there."

Blasts of power moving upward against the most prosperous and guarded section of the city. The rich residents there had fled on first sight of the Stormcloaks marching to build their camps, off to some farmhouse or homestead in the hold. Only soldiers, officers, agents of the Poenitus.

"Snowskin." Galmar chuckled. "That's a new one." His amusement took out the edge from blast and rumble echoing from the clouds. Splinter and rubble flew out, their parent houses still standing from Shadow Legion spells. Such unhonorable combat, yet necessary, Galmar thought. Enough so for the loyalists couldn't spot the carnage's source. Until a lone auxiliary pointed straight to the house. At the seventh volley arrows and counterspells began hitting the house. Telvanni wards kept everyone inside safe, the occasional arrow turned ash as it flew through a window. Galmar grinned and he stomped his pollaxe to the floorboards. A rumble of dust, in concert with rumbling in the Cloud District.

"Careful there, sire. The house doesn't like being shook."

Olfina stood by the Stormcloaks, her sword hilted. Galmar winced and looked over to Galmar. A shake of a head.

"The loyalists won't care for you or your uncle when they come for the house," he said. "Best to be sure you want to draw your sword."

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“Best that I draw it before we go Thorald’s way.”

Galmar nodded. Vignar just chuckled. “The Battle-born boy will be pleased.”

A blush.

“Come on lass, we Grey-manes have always been smarter. That’s why we joined with Ulfric after all.”

“You can talk of battles and births in bed after our battle now. Look.” Shieldwalls and axes behind them, shadow legion mages casting smoke to veil them.

“For Skyrim!” Olfina cheered.

“Ysmir help us, for Skyrim!” the troops followed.

“Oh you Nords,” Teldryn said. He turned to the mages. “Aim for their positions by the smoke, serae.”

“You’re lucky the Dragonborn’s an honorary Telvanni,” a wizard said.

“So I am. Fire at your marks.”

Large blasts erupted throughout the Wind District, the usual round of screams and guts spilling in equal measure. Galmar kept a still face, the carnage having grown boring in these last three months of back and forth fighting across two city-wide arenas spelling the great Arena’s fate. Bolts of spell flew back toward them, loud shouts from the sky and ground countering them.

“I guess the Dragonborn knew to attack now,” he said. “Let him carry his assault for a while.”

Another flight of two winged figures clouded the setting sun. No more wonder, no more excitement. The bloody business of war had set on Galmar’s senses, and he now only wanted to count the hours till their victory.

Bryling

Fre-das, 23 Hearthfire

Their wagons juttred through snowy passes and rocky paths, port of Dawnstar long gone, no one missing the ride by sea. Bryling never went this way, even in coldest weather. Yet her husband had insisted. The Stormcloaks in Labyrinthian too persistent, too stubborn to leave. Balgruuf and his court and all remaining loyalists kept cramped in the Cloud District, the rebels kept confidence that they would retake Morthal and Dawnstar and all a wayward babe thought his. Stonehills' miners knew what was theirs, work of stone and warmth of wood. The Thane's workers, her responsibility. Their caravans had been out on the road for half a day.

"My lady," a guard began. "We should be by Mzinchaleft by now."

"Excellent work so far, men." No one would find rest for much longer. "Once these supplies reach the mine we can feast all night."

"Aye." Cheers and mirth, a little warmth in the cold. Even warmer, when the bolt of flame reached the largest wagon.

"To arms!" the Thane cried. Yet her call came right when the assassin's blade tore through a guard's shin to his chin, Bryling managing her own in time for a parry and riposte. Her foe jumped back behind snow dunes, the Thane's attention forced back to the Dwarven ruin by her troops' screams.

Several figures in animal bone, spells and arrows flying loose at all sides. Shouts of 'n'wah' and 'fetcher' spilling with blood and guts as the thane of Haafingar shielded a caravan guard from a Dwarven arrow loosed from the great lift nearby. No protection could save him for a bolt of flame found his chest, the thane scurrying backward to meet

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an assassin's blade, parried. She bashed her pommel into her would be death and she thrust into a crack in the bone, his blood joining her comrades' on the ground. A few more assassin charging from the main ruin, north of the great lift. Spear of guard and assassin's blade, the former biting some in the distance only to be dropped as the next few chitin-covered swordsmen drew in. Bryling The encounter moved on, yet the thane's thoughts kept to her workers in Stonehills.

The ruin nearby kept many assassins perched to rain on her caravan carrying rations and arms, Bryling's guards barely managing a shieldwall. Their healer unloosed her robes to dash and cast a ward, her mistress loosing arrows to no effect against Dwarven defenses. The Pale had long been in Imperial hands since the great peace before the World Eater's fall, yet Stormcloak victory at Whiterun only poured oil over the Empire's newfound grip. In the field though, Bryling could pay no more heed to abstractions of coin and concord. The reality of an arrow zipping by had brought her attention back. The next arrow met her blade, a warrior's reflexes tempered by Talos. She wondered if the Stormcrown ever saw his wayward sons, much less these treacherous Dunmer with any favor. No one answered her with anything beyond bolts and blasts.

"Ysmir's soul, help us," a guardsman prayed.

"Quiet before the Thalmor get us," Bryling ordered. "Turn over the wagons and start falling back one by one. We can get to the Kjenstag outposts if we escape the hired blades."

"Orkey and his tricks," a guard swore, keeping hold to buy his brothers time. "Ysmir keep the life eater at bay."

"Ysmir vanquished him yet the dragon of the north fights against us now," another guard muttered, joining the last one. "My lady, flee with the rest."

"By Stendarr, I shall keep with my last men."

“Shor’s bones, Cyrodiilics and their strange gods.” The last guard flinched against a bolt of shock, held back by a ward. “They say Stuhn helped the Dragonborn.”

“Stendarr helps all men who show courage, and the Dragonborn is no exception.” The Thane stepped sideward and caught an arrow on her shield, saving their healer. “He shall help us too if we survive this onslaught.”

“By the gods, priestess, flee now.” A blast ringing before them, shattering a rock and scraping their healer. “Please my lady, the Dunmer won’t stop their assault.”

“Do it for the Legion or Shezarr or Reman or whomever you believe in.” The last guard knelt down and steadied his shield with an in-built stand. A nocked arrow which snapped, its spine singed. The wagons had long burned, leaving only their contents amid ashes. Bryling spotted a crossbow, its bolts scattered around it. She loosed toward a caster and she dashed for it, taking an arrow to her right pauldron. Her fall hurt yet she knew the bolt had to hit. A sulfur blast shook the great lift, smoke blinding its perched hunters.

“See? True Nords never lose courage even while fleeing.”

Bryling took an assassin’s satchel. Drop of weapons to the ground then a long dash under starting snowfall. The outpost was two days’ walk in this weather, their steps hindered by snow or Stormcloak or supper’s loss. Bryling would keep hold to the satchel, an assassin’s items always well-kept. A passing thought, then returning every now and then. Her mind fought through the snow and cold, and maybe peeking inside would help. There lay a writ of execution, official sanction and license. Bryling grimaced, the image of chitin-clad assassins in Solitude or Stonehills too much. Yet Stendarr showed his mercy in these times of distress. No one knew what pacts the Divines kept with each other, only their effects.

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Gallopings rumbled by half moons' height, a banner of Red Diamond surrounded by torchlight. Poenitus Oculatus agents had spotted them. Bryling had helped herself to the assassin's food, ashhopper's meat with no savory yet suitable to satiate. A legionary's supper could do her no wrong now.

"Lady Bryling, horses for you and your men."

"Why the Poenitus?"

"We stopped a Morag Tong assassin by the Solitude docks. She had orders to strike many people, your husband included."

Wide eyes. "Is he—"

"Under constant watch. All windows closed, all doors outside your bedroom barred by Captain Aldis's men. Even the sewers to the city are under watch."

"The Jarl?"

"Another assassin had orders to kill her. He escaped before we could question him. General Tullius and Legata Rikke had hits on them too."

"Stendarr grant us strength."

"Lady Bryling, we best get moving to the outpost. You'll be one of the highest ranked people there, and we could use more leadership."

"Thank you." She sighed. "But I don't deal with the top level of fighting well."

"As you wish. Tribune Hadvar would like some words though."

"Of course."

The trudge through the snow took mere hours on horseback. The moons had not yet reached midway downward when they caught sight of campfire and watching guards. They galloped inside, undisturbed by undisturbed campers and cooks. Only an old scribe, muttering to

himself *Poeniti Oculati thainam Haafingaarensis et vigiles eium salvaverunt ab Vulfrici Tempestatis Pallii Canis*. Bryling wondered how these inner eyes had failed to warn her by the time she reached Dawnstar. That matter would matter in due time, she thought. Only a bed and rest did then.

Sunrise brought the Legion's Tribune to the command tent, Bryling sitting half asleep on a chair. She awoke from metal clanging nearing the tent, arising to the Nord's somber smile.

"Good day, Thane."

"Good day, Tribune."

"You're doing well?"

"I am." The dawning winter sent its early winds. A light shake of tent, some snow spraying off the ground. "A little sleepy from our adventure last night."

"We're all a little sleepy from this adventure I guess."

Light pleasantries and talk. A report to General Tullius, the scale coated tribune said. Sanctions to Morrowind maybe, probably futile in face of Dunmer joining Ulfric in face of ash and ruin.

"It was a pleasure speaking with you, Thane."

"Of course. Greet the general for me when you meet him."

"I'll see to it."

A bow, and the Tribune took back his place by the theater map. Bryling headed to a mass of wagons and an entire century, all ready to head for Stonehills. Skyrim was only a small part of a conflict for all of the Arena. Yet even the smallest pieces could shake the whole off balance, Bryling mused. Her Stonehills could play its own part, and her help would help achieve that end.

Duach

Fre-das, 30 Hearthfire

His fellow Reachmen moved forward in their rusty mail and almost tattered cloaks, helmets pilfered from passing legionaries and hold guards, arming swords in ancient style forged from pilfered armor. Duach kept his kin's ancient traditions to heart. Nothing less from a Forsworn witchblade. He still smiled, though, when he saw the cannon move in from over the mountains. Their far-off brother from Cyrodiil had done them well.

“Hope you’re satisfied gawking at the artillery.”

Their king in rags, now in traditional finery. Nothing too fancy for a Reachman, but enough to show dignity.

“Strange tidings chanced us, Madanach.” The witchblade coughed his lungs empty and burned his spit to oblivion. “Dragons come out of hiding, then Hjalti Early-Beard’s kindred frees us. Had us take out cannibals all over Markarth too.”

“Very strange, yes.” Some men grunted and coughed from far-off, dawning winter shaking everyone. “Hircine guide us through it all.”

Snow bear cavalry inched through the redoubt’s flanks, off to scale and scout for Imperial movements. Marching troops flowed upward to the mountains, ready to fight for freedom and family. Duach himself threw on his helmet, looted from a draugr’s grave. It reeked of nordic excess yet the witchblade would never let anything go to waste. No Reachman would.

He jumped on his Reach mare and he scaled the pass up cliffside, seven years of slavery bringing no burden on his skills. He remem-

bered the map the Dragonborn gave his band. An Imperial camp in the Ragnvald ruin, recruits from all over Tamriel training and drilling. The Nords had propped up this regime, and the Reachmen would see its shackles cast. Duach remembered his childhood stories. How they had a kingdom all those years ago. How the Reachmen even ruled in the Imperial City. A unified mark of glory for them, from Cyrodiil to the Reach and into High Rock and Skyrim even. Duach gripped his lance as he guided his mare across rocks and gulleys, past streams flowing into the River Karth, sound of trot and neigh bouncing off cliffside and vale wall. He had always wanted to pierce a Nord with a blade. He wanted it ten years ago, when he raided that Imperial caravan and was enslaved for his struggle. Even his escape three years ago, when their newest brother found them, failed sating his drive. All Nords in the reach would find his fury or feel it.

“Nothing too hard for a witchblade, brother?” a woman’s voice echoed.

“You’d be surprised how little ten years could do, Kaie.”

The Reachwoman trotted her mane beside him. “We’ll see soon enough in the camp.”

“Been a while since my blade has tasted Nord blood.”

“Easy there, save the fury for when we strike.”

“I guess I should.” Winter’s winds blew through the vale, and first snow began its fall, yet the Reachmen kept trudging through. The same way they trudged through everything and everyone which tried to best them.

“Ever wondered what it’s like, Duach?”

“Wondered what?”

“Living in peace, nothing to fear.”

“I knew what it was like. I was a child, still feeding on my mother’s

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lap.”

“Everything will be better once we free the Reach.”

“We’ve had better times. The Reach did. All those times, they ended.”

“It’s different now. The Dragonborn helps us. Hammerfell helps us too.”

“All things in Peyrite’s time.” He asked the plague god’s blessings as they passed his shrine. Standing stones around a sacred grove, the Lord of Order tasking them to fight. The Hunt Father would guide them, victory or death only in Peyrite’s vision.

“Keep eyes forward, brother. Not anywhere else. It’s the way of the Reach.”

“Right.”

The snow flurry ended, and the sun shone again. Sun and snow, rain and dry, night and day. Today’s gain could be lost tomorrow. No point in musing any further. Their toil only another of games in the Arena.

Yet the Reachmen persevered, still fighting. Maybe this time they would win. One could dream, even hope.

His blade met a Nord legionary’s lungs. The Nord spat out blood as Duach stared into his dying eyes. His other hand burned the man’s head, a noble sacrifice to the old gods.

“Camp secured,” Duach announced to his band. “Have the cannon move over to the mountains.”

“Aye,” a Reachman said, running past the maze of bodies they made. Between the camp and Ragnvald lay an inconvenient mountain. Inconvenient for the Nords, that was.

“You sure about this plan, Duach?” Kaie sat by a roasting lamb’s leg.

“The rest of the men will strike in the confusion. Don’t worry.” He let out a smile to her. “The Hunt Father guides us.”

A smile in answer. “Alright. We’ll show the Nords who really owns the Reach.”

Duach kept position on a cliffside overlooking the ruin. Drills and practice below, cheery young men huffing and chanting as they formed shield walls and exchanged blows. Not only men, however. Lizards, elves, cats, even the odd ape and bull here and there. Nords were a funny lot. Wanting the province for themselves yet letting anyone else fight for them. No matter, for the cannon had reached their places.

“Mark!”

A band of shock and blast ringing down to the ruins. Iron and stone balls crashed and splintered into legionaries and auxiliaries. Duach smiled at the carnage below and let out a flame from his hand. Some men saw and pointed at him. No matter again. More blasts, now of flame and frost and shock. Some archers tried shots at him. Their arrows bounced off wards cast well before the volleys started.

“For the Reach! For Madanach!”

Reachman garbed in mail and scale scaled down and engaged in a mess of melee. Barely anyone in the legion’s side had prepared for this fight. Punches, hits from wooden swords, grapples from desperate loyalists. Their armor was weighted down with lead so Duach could easily slip his blade through gaps.

“Is this all that Nords could offer?” Duach howled. “You oppress us for centuries and this is all you have to give?”

A towering ape hurried to the staris by the platform near the main structure to answer Duach’s challenge. A large rapier struck into a witchblade, his body skewered. Another threw a bolt at him, her face gleaming in moonlight when the other one’s body met it. Duach ran

16. *Duach*

up and sliced at the ape's unarmored leg. The ape's anger thrust past him, a lucky parry letting Duach throw a fire blast. His towering foe grasped his face while a couple of witchblades threw bound spears at it. Duach himself cast a few daggers and threw them to each of the ape's joints. His rapier fell, with its wielder following, collapsing from the platform.

Some legionaries cowered by the ruin's archs. Duach burned them, man and mer and beast alike. He faced toward the path leading there. "The rest of you get in here."

Their supposed reinforcements marched in, the king leading them. "This was easy for a liberation."

"No kidding, Madanach."

"Hircine's favor mayhaps. No matter. All of you, get the bodies piled up and burned. We'll see to Ragnvald's interior."

Duach and Kaie moved over to the king's retinue, their blades and spells ready. They rammed down the ruin's door. A bull rushed out and rammed the retinue.

"Looks as ugly as a Nord," Duach howled. He stepped forward and sliced at the rushing bull's horn. The foe's axe passed over Duach, who rolled under it to plant a bolt behind his foe. Kaie bound a spear and threw it to the bull, who grabbed it only to see his prize vanish. Duach cast his flesh to stone and rushed forward to meet the Bull. Swing of the axe, stopped by a raised dagger. The bull breathed out so loudly that Duach thought he gasped. A smile, as the witchblade casted the ground to blow up.

They all rushed inside and burned anything and anyone. It was only an Imperial officer and his command staff, now featureless corpses. Some weapons racked, some documents, now ashes.

"You said this was the Nords' largest garrison outside of Markarth."

Duach scratched his head at his king's words. "It was. But we took care of everyone."

"Duach, there was no army here. Only boys who should have stayed in farms. Some who were better off as farm tools even."

Duach gritted his teeth. "Does it matter, Madanach? The Nords lost many here."

"Where did you get your information?"

"Our favorite outsider gave me the map." He handed it to Madanach.

"It says it's a training garrison—"

"Plenty of troops here oppressing the Reach."

"—for the Imperial Legion."

"What of it?"

"The Nords are rising up against the Imperial Legion."

"Preposterous. The Nords build the Imperial Legion."

Madanach sighed. "Peyrite forgive me. We wasted precious time and personnel at this hasty move, Duach."

"What are you even talking about? We slaughtered a good many of our enemies today."

"These enemies would have killed more Nords if we left them alive. Even now, they could have tried retaking their city of Whiterun."

"They also could have gone elsewhere, or stood guard. Either way, they're better off dead."

"Enough of this. We may all be fellow Reachmen, but I am still your king by popular appeal. I warned everyone that we should have stayed put until the civil war ended, but now we have too many hunters now." Madanach shook his head. "Kaie, take him to the Redoubt. Have him atone in the cellar."

16. *Duach*

“You can’t be serious Madanach.”

“Have no worries, I’ll have her accompany you for your needs. You should be grateful to stay in comfortable conditons.”

“I would rather be bearing my blade against more Nords.”

“You’ve done plenty killing today, Duach. We should be getting back to hiding until the right time.”

Duach grimaced. “If it be your command, Majesty.”

Madanach growled. “Watch your words, the same way you should have watched your plans.”

“Come on, Duach.” Kaie tugged at him. “We’ll have plenty of rest back there.”

Duach turned to her, then to Madanach, then to the charred insides. “Alright. But this isn’t over Madanach.”

“It never will be. Just as Peyrite keeps balance in Mundus.”

Lydia

Mid-das, 25 Hearthfire

“The Cloud District still has some fight left in it.”

Junius lay in his harbinger’s quarters, yesterday’s fighting finishing off defenders by Jorrvaskr. Lydia kept to the main hall. She never liked it inside, a dreary place and downcast light from the central fireplace, only Stormcloak and Eastmarch banners giving even faintest decor. She found comfort in her blade and her husband, his face flushed from fighting. Her own flushed for him yet other matters mattered then. She opened a door and let in troops huddling under a shieldwall. The bear-draped commander followed, their king in tow.

“So we bear witnes to the final taking, Junius?”

The king left his often worn smile by the camp, a grave look concerning concern. Lydia cleared her throat.

“My king—”

“Please spare the formalities, lady. What we now?”

Lydia smiled. “We think to scale the Skyforge.”

“Skyforge?” The bear-hooded commander allowed a faint smile. “Gray-Mane won’t like his tools being bothered with.”

Lydia chuckled. “The Cloud District only has one gate access. However, the cliffs by the Skyforge only have a few guards.”

“Our Dragonborn up to his old tricks.”

“Those tricks always saved us in the end,” the king said. “What of us after you get in?”

“Just hold till we get the gates open.” She turned outside, the Sky-

17. *Lydia*

forge glow mixing with sunset wash over sky. The Cloud District itself surrounded Dragonsreach as one final ring to pass. No easy pickings, even after all their damage dealt.

“Any news from outside the city?”

Galmar shrugged. “Our greyskin assassins failed to get rid of the Solitude pack.” A smile. “Just as expected. No more supplies flow to Hjaalmarch out of fear for ambushes.”

“Glad to see one of yours worked this time.”

“Very flattering. We all can’t be like your Junius after all.”

Laughter echoed through the hall. A loud ruckus, a nice change from the lull that had grown since they took the Wind District. Good tidings, Lydia hoped. And she could hope for Whiterun’s fall would mark Skyrim’s rise. Only days stood till then.

Housescarls, Dawnguard, Skaal, the Companions, a Dunmer warrior, and a Telvanni sorceress, Junius’s classmate when he had studied with the Temple of Jhunal. The last one Lydia had never met, having stayed in Whiterun till Junius graduated.

“All of you get ready.” Junius brought with him a few potions. “Brelyna, explain what you’ll do.”

“Uhm, I’ll cast a spell over you all.” The dunmer looked nervous. “Let’s just say it involves conjuration.”

“The greyskin has a trick up her sleeve?” Galmar said over from the Jorrvaskr tables.

“It’s not a trick!” Brelyna pouted. “You’ll feel a little uncomfortable when I do this, so I’m sorry.”

“What exactly will she do?” Lydia asked.

“You’ll see.” The Dragonborn turned to the troops. “Meet me by the gatehouse once we get up there.”

“How exactly will the mage help us get up there?”

“Watch. Better yet, wait.”

Blue light surrounded the Telvanni mage and she let it flow over to the ready troops. Lydia felt a tingle run through her, and she flapped her wings to—wings?

“It’ll take a while for you to get used to it,” Brelyna explained. “But for now, just get to the gatehouse and help Ulfric become king.”

A majestic looking raven hovered by Brelyna, nodding and rubbing against her face.

“Easy now Junius, you got more important business now.”

Lydia turned around. Everyone was a raven, trying hard to control their flying. The raven that Brelyna said was Junius kept patient wait till everyone got the hang of it. Lydia herself tried a few moves. A surreal move in war, but effective. If only Junius informed everyone beforehand, she thought.

The party flew, gliding on winds caused by the Skyforge’s heat. Dragonsreach looked mighty from this angle, Lydia thought. The birds had a nice view. They all did, flying just outside the city limits. From afar, Lydia could see only peace, beauty, meadows and grasslands recently snowed in. What lives did beasts have. What did Shor plan for them, she wondered. Why let humans try to achieve godhood as Tiber Septim did, if they brought ruin to this peace.

The Cloud District was high enough to be colder than the rest of the city. Whiterun’s richest, nobles, important persons. The occasional diplomat, like that Etaud Montierre. Their homes now serving as barracks, armories, field hospitals. Cinderling from the months-long siege. The dragons had not made their move yet, maybe waiting for the party to land. And so they stepped on the last walls, sole barrier to Stormcloak victory. A guard sighted them, moved to carress Lydia. She knew

17. *Lydia*

birds enjoyed it, and she did. Enough that Junius made the guard's death painless.

"At least let him do it a little longer."

The party had returned to normal after a while, Junius having landed earlier.

"No telling if he would have sounded an alarm."

"You always put it that way."

"No time for jokes now, Lydia." Junius breathed in. "We need to get the gates open."

"Fine. More fun for us later I guess."

The Dawnguard took positions by the battlements, crossbows in hand. This wall was the best defended. Machicolations, crenellations, merlons, a steel gate. A few ballistae now and then. All futile when even a small group of enemies get on top.

"The loyalists should change guard shifts now," Lydia said. "We can get to the gatehouse quickly."

"Maybe we should just roast them all alive?" Teldryn said.

"Terrible idea, greyskin," Vilkas said.

"He has a point," Junius said. "Get to the gatehouse, Lydia. When we hear the portcullis open, we'll distract them here."

"Got it."

"Companions and housecarls, on her lead. The rest of you, keep watch."

Lydia and her party sneaked through the wall. All guard shifts began by the Dragonsreach side, that last guard unlucky enough to stall. Weapon crews stayed put for longer, so they needed quieting. The gatehouse had its own shifts. No one could figure out the pattern there. Ly-

dia thought they just changed whenever they felt like it. Maybe they also lacked the men. Either way, they should prove no problem.

“You think I could call the beast here?”

“Not now, Aela. Just keep sneaking till we get to the gatehouse.”

“Kodlak once said you were too feisty.”

“Sure, icebrain. Maybe say something original once in a while.”

“Hey now, you two stay quiet.” Lydia flinched when she heard chatter by an indent in the battlements.

“Take them down, Rayya.”

“With pleasure.”

The Redguard threw a couple of darts into the indent. Two thuds, and they went moving again.

“You think I should have let Junius teach me a bit after he became Harbinger?”

“Shut it, Ria.”

“Still jealous he got the role before you, Njada?”

“Both of you pipe down,” Lydia ordered. “Jordis, scout ahead. Two more weapon emplacements we found.”

“Understood. May I make Junius proud.”

“You will, I guess. Now go.”

“Wait,” a stout man asked. “What will we do?”

“Just wait, Calder.”

They waited while the Solitude blonde moving up, not letting her head go past the battlements. A tense quiet set in.

“You think she’s in trouble?”

“No, Rayya. She’s fine.’

17. *Lydia*

“You think she’ll make it back?”

“Yes, Ria”

“There’ve been no sounds so far.”

“That’s a good thing.”

Hushes and silence when footsteps rang. Only Jordis, back from her reconaissance.

“Both emplacements are empty.”

“Empty?” Lydia raised an eyebrow. “Move up to the gatehouse.”

They scurried, still being careful not to be seen. The gatehouse moved into view after passing a turn. If anyone saw them from the windows, they didn’t let it on.

“Hurry inside.”

Three loyalist auxiliaries dozing off, a short rest in the short lull. Vilkas stabbed two of them, and Aela slit the last one’s throat.

“Must really be short on men,” Aela said.

“Say,” Calder started. “Why did we tell the king that we’d scale the Skyforge cliffs?”

“Ask Junius. This was one of his.”

“Alright.”

Lydia saw the lever that would raise the portcullis. “Aela, loose an arrow toward Dragonsreach. Light it up.”

“On it.”

Aela wrapped an oily rag around her arrow and lit it. The Dragonborn’s war-wife pulled the lever, opening the gate. Iron grated and rumbled, sounds of the liberation progressing. Pluck of bowstring, and the evening sky shone. Bells rung and orders barked out as the party prepared themselves for a fight.

“Ysmir guide our blades and Tsun strengthen our hearts,” Vilkas prayed.

“Just watch, Vilkas.”

A cannon barrage struck the far side of the wall. The darkening sky glowed as spells and artillery and dragonfire bore against the final loyalist stronghold. Lydia could see crossbow bolts and wicked spells cast nearer to them. Stormcloak shieldwalls began pouring in from the breach where that first guard died.

“This is it.” Junius stepped into the gatehouse, flanked by Dawn-guard. “Dragonsreach will fall by midnight.”

They stepped down to the cloud district’s main street. Stormcloak troops marched in, taking in how Whiterun’s finest lived before the siege. Even in its battered state, it still bested Windhelm in its peak, Lydia thought.

A group of men in finery approached them. “We’re civilians caught in the siege,” one said. “Please grant us safe passage.”

“Imperial dogs!” a Redoran warrior shouted as he swung at them. “Pay for refusing us help after Red Mountain.”

Lydia flinched at what just happened.

“Keep moving.” Junius sighed. “Dragonsreach should be close.”

Some legionaries had just finished stripping off their armor. “Don’t engage, we surrender.”

Stormcloak javelins answered them. Lydia’s face twisted. Her first thought was of bandits by the Valtheim towers, when she first went with Junius. What fate befell their captives.

Screams echoed across the Cloud District. Lydia saw some of theirs dragging some soldiers in binds. A berserker fell each of them one by one.

17. *Lydia*

“Should be an easy way up there.” Junius pointed to the palace sprouted up by the hill. A dragon once fell there. Another still would fall.

A war troll pounded on Dragonsreach’s doors. Several troops bared their weapons, howling and cheering.

“The Medes ought to have given their troops more mead,” someone jeered. Laughter erupted as the war troll kept its task.

“Maybe Balgruuf wasn’t all that greater after all.”

“Greater licking my boots maybe.”

Lydia’s gaze kept to her sword. A stahlrim special, pretty and elegant. Good for killing when she needed to. It was Junius’s gift for their wedding. She had another sword, gifted by the one she would fight tonight. Long sold to some merchant, she no longer remembered who.

The doors fell, and the troops poured in with fury in their moves. Barricades of overturned tables and torn banners supported legionaries and some Poeniti Oculati loosing arrows and javelins and darts and bolts. Telvanni mages blasted them apart, barricades and men alike. Stormcloak mettle kept them all moving to the throne.

“For Whiterun! For Skyrim!” Lydia shouted as she charged along.

She fell upon the hall, which had held her, raised her, gave her food and lodge for most of her life. Where she had learned how to read, how to fight. Where she had her first assignment as a warrior Nord, where she had met her love. Where she had sworn loyalty to the man on the throne.

“Stay back, my Lord.” A dark elf woman pleaded.

“I’ll be damned if I let this rabble take my city without raising my own sword.”

A familiar voice, once caring, loving, now firm in anger. The throne place had barricades and around half a century protecting Jarl Balgruuf.

“Protect the Jarl with your lives!”

Her order answered by a shout. FUS RO DAH. The entire force forced down to their knees. YOL TUUR SHUL. Flames swallowing them all, defenseless in Kyne’s breath. The Dragonborn let out a few more blasts of magic, and it was over.

“Enough!” A weaker voice fought for attention. “That’s enough.” His voice now defeated. “I surrender. I surrender.”

What few defenders who survived let out cries and readied for another charge.

“Peace! Everyone stand down. That’s an order. Stand down!”

The hall, once full of fury, now had somber silence.

“Give me a few hours to gather my household,” the Jarl pleaded. “And I’ll depart. You have my word”

Lydia fell silent, trying to catch her breath. The campaign had ended. Skyrim won her first victory in decades.

“Balgruuf.”

An old man, flanked by a young lass and several guardsmen. Someone from the companions, too.

“Vignar Gray-Mane! Your family was noticeably absent from the walls. Now I know why. Wouldn’t a dagger in the back have sufficed?”

“You think this is personal? The Empire has no place in Skyrim. Not any more. And you? You have no place in Whiterun anymore.”

It sounded personal, Lydia thought.

“A convenient position to hold now. But mark my words, old man,

17. *Lydia*

in the days to come, Ulfric will spread his rebellion thin. And what then?"

Lydia's blood froze. She fought down her fears. If not Ulfric, then Junius would pave Skyrim's future.

"We need the Empire, as much as it needs us. We Nords are the Empire! Our blood built it. Our blood sustains it! You of all people should know that."

Vignar groaned. "If this was my Empire, I'd be able to worship whomever I damned well pleased. They have a city of a million cults yet they can't let Shor inside. You wish to see an Empire without Shor? Withering its soul by taxing Ysmir Talos? We should be fighting those witch-elves, not bending knee to them."

Lydia sighed in relief. She knew why she fought.

"The Emperor is nothing more than a puppet of the Thalmor. Skyrim needs a High King who will fight for her, and Whiterun needs a Jarl who will do the same."

"Tell me, Vignar. Was all this worth it? How many of those corpses lining our streets wear the faces of men who once called you friend? What about their families?"

She knew no friends there. Only childhood rivals and bullies.

"Enough!" the bear-hooded commander howled from the doors. "Both of you! There is a burning city out there that needs a government."

Vignar sighed, looked over to the troops. "He's right." They all cheered their new Jarl. "Galmar, come, let us restore order."

The cheers continued. Balgruuf could only walk away, up the stairs. Lydia sat down by one of the tables, turned right side up in the fighting. Junius walked over to her, catching his breath. Everyone else had themselves to the scattered food and drink.

After a while, the former Jarl walked back down to the hall, retinue surrounding him. Vignar only stared at him, his niece gripping her sword anxiously.

“This isn’t over. You hear me you old fool? This isn’t over.”

As they kept moving, Balgruuf turned his head. He stood there, his face paralyzed. Then it turned to anger.

“And you, Junius. Even you, Lydia.”

She gulped. Junius said nothing.

“Stormcloaks? Both of you? I’d thought better of you.” His face broke down to tears. “You’ll all come to regret this day.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, Balgruuf.” Junius sighed. The fleeing company said no words, instead starting their long march under the mid-night rain.

Lydia slept with her love in one of the rooms there that night, after a long bath. They had spent long in taking the city, but they succeeded. Just as winter set in. Lydia turned over to Junius’s sleeping face. Full of scars from their journeys, healed in the nick of time, remaining marks of a long, hard life. Her own face could not help breaking down into tears. They had won, and they would all suffer more for it. Through the winter, into the next campaign.

Part II.

The Winter

Kyne could have stopped all of this but did nothing but stare at the crowd of Nords around her. Stuhn and Tsun were shifting and it was still uncouth to prevent this kind of neighboring. She looked on Jhunul and did not know if he should be spoken to or not. Rules were changing. Even her handmaiden was gone, and that lack of attendance was a transgression, but Kyne knew Mara was no doubt making treaties with one of the other chieftains, and the Pact still allowed for Tear-Wives to do that. After her husband Shor had forgotten to kiss her, a tradition among the War-Married when they returned from the field together, Kyne kept her storms to herself and knew there would be no true understanding until the twilight was lifted...

And the awful fighting began again.

Shor, son of Shor, transcribed by Mikhael Karkuxor

Ulfrie

Morn-das, 3 Frostfall

“And that’s why ole Mera lost Murvanskar.”

Laughter erupted by the candlehearth, his Majesty’s finest officers filled with fat and food for cold days ahead. Then applause, the king raising his mead horn for all to see.

“I want to raise this horn for all the sons and daughters of Skyrim who fought for Whiterun’s freedom.”

Cheers, some revelers starting to sing.

“We drink to our youth and to days come and gone.”

“For the Age of Oppression is just about done.”

Banging on tables, the dunmer bard playing her lute. Ulfrie had never seen this mirth since his victory in Markarth, around twenty years past.

“To the elves of the Grey Quarter, for whom we tore down the wall.”

Laughter, from the elves with pronged swords who bothered to join. The Dragonborn’s aide was taking a swig when he laughed.

“We have Whiterun safe in our hands now. My old friend Vignar rules, and our Dragonborn readies to lead once winter ends.”

“Our hero, our hero claims a warrior’s heart.”

“Beware, beware, the Dragonborn comes.”

Laughs and cheers as the night aged, as winter set in that year, the 204th after Martin Septim’s sacrifice to save the Empire, Tiber Septim’s legacy. The same legacy which Ulfrie set his sword to take down in its founder’s name.

The future high king left the hall long after twilight down to Windhelm's cold streets, ever frozen. The city's usual sights and senses greeted him. Faintest smell of pungent mushrooms carried by wind, dunmer structures rising near Eastern docks. Western houses and stores, safe with strong walls rising around them, no so-called loyalist army daring to approach. Ulfric's palace of kings, his palace, Skyrim's kings tracing down to him. A large structure marking Windhelm's place in Mundus. Cold and lonely. Like all Nords and their allies in Ysmir's distant gaze. Strong and firm. Like Shor's patience in the Hall of Heroes for his children to join him. As Ulfric hoped he would.

"Get out of our city, gray-skins! This is Nord land!"

A drunken shout from a familiar face. Ulfric stepped to his housecarl's brother and he smacked him clean, blood spurts frozen before falling.

"Bastard. I will not have you causing more ruckus with all I have to deal with."

The fallen grasping aimlessly for leverage, trying to stand back up. Ulfric nodded to a guard, who pulled Rolf Stone-Fist up.

"Well Ulfric, I didn't think you had a soft spot for these greyskins."

"I don't have to take anything from a man who uses stipends from his brother just to live." He turned to the guard. "Have him in the pit tomorrow."

"Gods damn it Ulfric, Galmar will hear of this."

"He'll laugh once he does."

Frozen majesty turning back to his slumber's home. A slumber well-deserved after months taking Skyrim's earthborne heart. His palace's mighty doors opening, letting him in to ancient benches which had paid host to many feasts and cheers. His ancient throne standing watch over what few men still ate there this late.

18. *Ulfric*

“Ulfric,” his steward called. “Been a fun night?”

“Funnest in 20 years, Jorleif.”

“Not exactly my mug of mead, but nice to see you happy again.”

“But why else? Three whole years of soil and toil, and only now have we Whiterun.”

“Whiterun must have been a tough nut.”

“So was Balgruuf. Kept stubborn to the end.”

“One would ask whether Balgruuf should have surrendered, knowing the mess he left.”

“He’s a Nord, Jorleif. Much as the loyalists disgust me, many of them are Nords. Many will die before they even consider surrendering.”

Ulfric walked up to his bedroom, one room out of many in those ancient halls. A fireplace keeping warmth, a washbasin, a soft bed. Some food and drink for tomorrow morning. His home for 20 years and more, when he was still a whelp on his mother’s lap.

His vision faded and his mind drifted off to his memories. His father teaching his first blade strikes. His mother telling tales of Ysgramor, of Ysmir Wulfharth, of Talos Stormcrown. How Martin Septim saved Tamriel and all Nirn from daedric oblivion. How the Companions defended Whiterun from invading hordes. How the Empire fell apart from infighting, till one man united them all with Skyrim’s help. Of a flying city, Emperor Attrebus, Empress Annaig. How the Empire kept Tamriel under its light.

Now he fought for the Empire. He raised its red banner against Aldmeri hordes by Lake Rumare. Capture. Captivity. Torture.

That elven woman. She looked at him, smiled, hurt him, violated him. His secrets spilling, leading to the Imperial City’s fall.

Escape and freedom, joining the Emperor’s army in Red Ring. The

Emperor wielding a daedric sword, Goldbrand. Saving a man's life, keeping him as his housecarl. Joining Delphine and the Blades in capturing Lord Naarifin, hanging him from the White-Gold tower, magic keeping him alive for more than a month. His prophecy never fulfilled. Yet the Empire saw otherwise.

A sudden gasp, and awakening. Ulfric looked around him. Just his home again, no Thalmor, no loyalists. And his duties for the day.

"M'jarl, we have a giant trashing about by our farm."

"This the one near the White River?"

"Yes, m'jarl."

"Very well. I'll go send some of the Dragonborn's housecarls to deal with it."

"My thanks, Jarl Ulfric."

The fallen Dunmer noble bowed, and he left again back to his farm. The war had slowed down, and Ulfric could now focus on being a Jarl again.

"Such is the life, Jarl Ulfric. Sitting or standing by the throne, hearing people plead your judgement."

"Don't push it, Jorleif."

"Well, I'll go summon Junius's men." He pulled out a torn piece of paper. "Valdimar, Gregor, and," he raised an eyebrow. "Rayya?"

"The last one's in Falkreath, tending to the Dragonborn's property."

"I'll scratch out her name then. I'm sure a spellsworn and a warrior could deal with the threat."

"Mara soothe me, I'm sure the giant just has a splinter or something."

"A little peace in winter never hurt anyone, my Jarl. Let yourself

18. *Ulfric*

rest, just as the troops do.”

“I’ve had rest. My first in 20 years.”

“Old Hoag would be proud.”

“By the gods, him again?”

“My apologies, Ulfric.”

A silence, while Ulfric sat sleepily on his throne. A quarter-hour, half an hour, some time passed before he jolted awake.

“We’re going to Murvanskar.”

“Now, Ulfric?”

“A ceremony for buried Nords. The start of a new time for Skyrim.”

“Very well.”

Ulfric rode on his steed, followed by a cadre of city guards. Some dunmer, the Dragonborn’s aide bearing a banner of wreathed Red Diamond. His other troops following him. A Nibenayese woman, former necromancer, now clad in Blades’ armor. City crowds cheering and throwing autumn petals.

They crossed the bridge out of Windhelm and they moved to the hillside where Morvunskar laid. An old ruined fort, lately fixed. A good spot for bandits and waylayers to gather in wait. Till the Dragonborn had come.

“Eight hundred years ago,” Ulfric said to those gathered. “Akaviri invaders wreaked havoc over Skyrim. The Skald-King Jorunn had no choice but retreat. Then,” a wind blew past them. “Thane Mera Stormcloak, one of my foremothers, took arms with the king and helped defeat them. King Ysmir Wulfharth, summoned from Sovngarde, aided them in their ruinous hour.”

Sounds and murmurs of approval. Some dunmer yawned.

“Then treason erupted. Fildgor Orc-Thane led savage orcs to take Morvunskar, where we now stand. Graves and tombs of ancient heroes defiled. Thane Mera tried a desperate defense, but had to retreat. Then, Skald-King Jorunn came and retook the fort with a new host. Thus did my line begin in noble straits. So will Skyrim’s ancient heroes witness a new time for Skyrim’s health!”

“All hail to Ulfric!”

“All hail the High King!”

“I hope to see you again in ten years here, for my Konunleikar.”

Laughter and cheers, then applause. A priest of Talos, Ysmir Dragon of the North, chanted prayers for the world to see. No Thalmor to tax His sons. To hurt Shor’s followers. Only the Divines’ blessings.

Jordis

Tir-das, 4 Frostfall

“Tell me,” Whiterun’s captor said. “Where did Tiber Septim come from?”

“Atmora, my thane,” she answered.

“So they all say. Just like the Ratway being empty. Or Maven Black-Briar being of use here.”

“It’s Alcaire, then.”

“Right you are.”

Cold winds blowing through the docks into the city. Frost’s fall had already come as far south as the Whitewatch. The sun would see its dusk soon, and Jordis could hardly wait for things to cool down. Both the air and the war.

“My thane, we should head back to Whiterun. Our business here is done.”

“Forget about being your thane. Your husband has been waiting for a chance to get out with you and the other three.”

Jordis clutched her face. “Lady Sylgja—”

“She’s only Sylgja, Jordis.” A light chuckle.

“Sylgja probably wants to return, too.”

“She’s all fine after catching up with her parents.”

“Lad—Lydia is probably getting impatient, too.”

“When is she not.”

The swordmaiden let out a light giggle. “Brelyna is fine here too, I

guess.”

“She is. Anything the matter?”

“Well.” A light hum. “It’s very, comfy, in Whiterun.”

“Nothing like a warm bed in the middle of winter.”

“Better than living in a dead serial killer’s hideout at least.”

Jordis flinched. She heard that voice coming from the marketplace.
“Find anything useful, Lydia?”

“Grelka got a new shipment of gambesons.”

“For the war effort, I assume.”

“Well yeah. Not like we’d have any use for it.”

“A few of Elgrim’s elixirs would have suited better.”

“Hey, we got enough healers as there are. Ingun’s busy making potions, too.”

“She’s right, Jordis.” Her Thane yawned. “I got her to haggle for the armor.”

“Oh. Of course, my Thane.”

“It’s Junius. Or love. Or dear.”

“Uhm, yes, Junius.”

“Alright, both of you cling to me.”

They each took an arm.

“No, I mean cling on to me tight.”

“Oh.”

They locked themselves to Junius in a tight embrace. A whimsy sound, and Jordis could feel nothing under her.

“Wha—”

“No more Empire. No more laws against levitation.”

They flew above Riften, and Jordis could sketch out its layout. Mistveil Keep, secure by Mount Forelhost. Noble and patrician houses, safe in their own quarter. Then the marketplace, then the rest of the city. Canals crisscrossing quarters, boatmen and some ships dropping cargo and passengers. At last, the graveyard by the Temple of Mara. Where they all wedded the Dragonborn. She remembered those days. The Radiant Raiment in Solitude delivered clothes for them every time. Gratitude for the Thane trying out clothes in front of Jarl Elisif.

Yet Jordis doubted whether Junius kept his title.

Junius pressed a secret button, then a tomb slid backwards. They went down stairs, a long passage down. The Ratway under Riften led everywhere, yet Junius had torches and magelights placed for light. Signs, too. He owned the facilities there, after all.

They went past a room, barred from both sides. They had placed the Thieves Guild members there after wiping them out. A deal with that shopkeeper Bersi Honey-Hand, and some talk to that adventurer Mjoll. Then they had stormed the Ragged Flagon and had killed everyone there. A dunmer merchant had taken up residence there, under Junius's patronage. But they had found a worthier prize afterwards.

They entered a large room, tubes running everywhere, some enchanting tables, alchemy booths, forges, enough equipment to suit an army. At the center, the Staff of Chaos. Jordis remembered her history lessons among Haafigar's noble children. A battlemage, Jagar Tharn, had spent his life's research making the thing. Over ten years, he had impersonated the Emperor Uriel VII after imprisoning him in Oblivion using the staff. But an Elder Council member had retrieved all pieces, rescuing the Emperor and banishing the traitor. For his service, Ocato of Firsthold had become the next imperial battlemage, ris-

ing up to be chancellor after a few years. But the Thalmor had killed him after the Oblivion Crisis. Then the Empire had descended into chaos again.

A woman sat by a doorway, dozing off. Junius called out to her.

“Mjoll, is Salvianus doing okay?” Junius said.

She sat upright. “Still has nightmares sometimes. But doing well now.”

“Very well. Have to say, Tharn’s equipment does us wonders.”

“I’m still creeped out being here,” Lydia said. “Mythic Dawn founder, conniver with Mehrunes Dagon, helped Mankar Camoran in his early days. Just screams bad news.”

“Thank you for saying that the hundredth time.” Junius yawned. “Anyhow, let’s rest. We’ll be in Whiterun tomorrow.”

“Uhm, Junius.” Jordis cleared her throat. “What do we do after winter?”

“Fight again.” Junius chuckled. “We’ll probably head for Falkreath next.”

“Right.”

“But worry about that once winter ends. Lets rest for now. A two month siege isn’t exactly a vacation.”

“Alright.”

They entered their room, lit by a skylight. Lydia stretched out with a sigh, then jumped on their bed. The Haafingar housecarl chose to sit down, hands together.

“Anything wrong?”

She looked up. Junius had already bathed, and was ready to relax for the day. Jordis hummed.

"I've never been in a war before."

"We've fought many times before."

"Against bandits and raiders and waylayers. Not a war."

Junius smiled. "Never thought you'd be scared once in your life."

Jordis blushed, and she hid her face.

"Never really thought that would happen."

"Wars are different. So much planning, so many factors, so many moves. Fighting against world eating beasts is easier."

"We'll win, Jordis."

"How do you know?"

"The rebels have me."

She froze, then she laughed.

"First time I've seen you smile today."

"But of course we'll win because of you."

"Yes."

They held each other in an embrace. Jordis took her turn to wash, and she put on a light dress. She would not fear, for her hero with a warrior's heart was here.

She sat down by their main chamber, reading a few books. *The Arc-turian Heresy*. Zurin Arctus's failed attempt at tainting Tiber Septim's name. *The Fall of the Usurper*. About the Camoran Usurper, with a new epilogue about his illegitimate son. Junius gave her that book, and she found out that Tiber Septim really was a Breton from Alcaire. *Sovngarde Reexamined*. The book which popularized the idea of dying in battle as Sovngarde's only entrance. Junius had so happily refuted that, and historians and bards had torn the book apart ever since. *The Infernal City*. Mede propaganda about Emperor Attrebus

and Empress Annaig.

“Reading again, lass?”

Salvianus had finished another healing session, it seems. Junius had Brelyna and other mages tend to him in their spare time.

“I am.”

“Very good. Better so you wouldn’t end up like me in the Ratway.”

She remembered how he had been. Muttering old memories while they had looked for that old Blade, Esbern.

“Care to tell another story about the war?”

“Aye, I will.”

The old veteran told another war tale, this time about the Imperial city’s sacking in the Great War.

“Their fires shone above Lake Rumare like stars. It was beautiful, really.”

Sights and sounds of the battle. All leading up to an old prophecy.

“Naarifin wanted to sacrifice everyone there. Had them watch bouts in the arena everyday, waiting for the perfect moment to begin the Culling.”

“Why did they want that?” Jordis asked.

“To summon daedra. Blasted Thalmor, boasted that they stopped the Crisis in Alinor, now just gonna bring them back.” A loud chuckle.

“How did you live?”

“Swam across Rumare, then linked up with my unit in the Highlands. A member of the Poenitus was there. Went to the city, got captured by a Dremora. Met with a Blade named with Tyr, escaped, then headed back for the Emperor.”

“Did the Emperor really wield Goldbrand in battle?”

“He did. I saw it with my own eyes. A terrible sight, just slaying the Altmer hordes.” A gulp. “They were golden, even when they were dead. But their blood was red. I knew it would be.”

A shiver went through Jordis’s spine.

“We fought our way into the city. That Ulfric was there with us, and that man Galmar too. Some Blades, even. The old man, the woman. The Emperor led the charge to Naarifin. Out of spite, some of us hung him and kept him alive with food and water. No one really knew what happened to the bastard.”

Tale of a siege, with all its horrors. Whiterun was not as bad, yet still bad nonetheless. Civilians fearing for their lives within homes. Surrendering troops butchered. She remembered how they had sneaked in to raise the gates. Junius had cannons blast part of the Cloud District’s wall as a diversion. He had marched in with them, his party, some berserkers, some select bannermen. Dragonsreach had lasted not an hour.

Now the Dragonborn would come, an end to the evil of all Skyrim’s foes. Within or without.

Helvard

Tur-das, 6 Frostfall

“How many more bandits can we throw there?”

His Jarl stormed off from the map, just short of pulling his hair out. Another guard detachment cut down by Lake Ilinalta, their foes springing from North Shriekwind Bastion and chasing them for half a day against Lakeview Manor. One survived to tell the tale.

“I never should have given the fiend his estate in the first place. Gods know what the Redguard woman is doing there, training or fighting or plotting.”

“My Jarl, if I may—”

“No more from you, Helvard. I expect the guards to lose half their wages until the Dragonborn’s forces are pushed out of his estate.”

“Even then, we barely have enough men to mount an assault as we are.”

“So many bandits dot this hold. Get some coin from the treasury and get every last one to strike a month from now. They can take whatever they loot from that fiend.”

The housecarl left the Longhouse, passing by Zaria’s alchemy store, through the gates to find a dead man’s drink.

“Another encounter with the Jarl?” the barkeep said.

“You know how it is, Valga.” He cleared his throat. “Just a couple shots of mead.”

Drink pouring into a shot glass, a loaf of warm bread following. “Take it on the house, Helvard. As long as the war keeps quiet.”

“For Skyrim, sure. Jarl’s getting me to round up bandits.”

“Don’t think they’ll be much active in the winter.”

“Not for the dungeon.”

“Oh?”

“Jarl’s run out of options. He wants them to do the dirty work by the Lakeview.”

“I heard about that. What was that Sidgeir thinking, sending three dozen guards against an entire estate?”

“Gods know. Maybe having the rebels come here in full force would be more entertaining.”

“Quiet! Who knows who could have heard you.”

“Acting like Dengeir now? He would have been taken out years ago if anyone was serious about Falkreath.”

“With Whiterun in rebel hands, who knows now.”

“Oh well.” Helvard downed his shot, finishing off with the bread. “You can keep that second shot, thanks for the bread.”

“Gods guide you to whatever bandits you catch.”

Helvard put on his plated mail, rode his steed from the Longhouse stables, out to Falkreath’s gates, past the outside stables to meet his first prize. A few hours’ ride to the Cracked Tusk Keep, held by the Companions after the Oblivion Crisis, now mere ruins. The Dragonborn once cleared it, yet the war had forced some desperates to seek shelter here in-between raids.

“If it isn’t the Jarl’s milkmaid.”

Laughs and jeers from some patrols. “Come here to fetch us some milk?”

“I have a bag of gold for anyone who—”

“Come on, crow. You think anyone would work with your Jarl after what happened to the men in Knifepoint Ridge?”

“Those bandits shouldn’t have crossed him.”

“Oh?” A woman in dwarven armor stepped forward, wielding a hammer. “What makes you think that *we* won’t cross him?”

“You haven’t even heard my offer yet!”

“Do tell us what it is.”

“I’m collecting a bunch of you talented men and women to take out the Dragonborn’s estate.”

Silence.

“Anyone can loot whatever he or she wants without fear of reprisal. Some of you can even use the property for whatever deed you may so please.”

“I guess you’ll repeat this offer for all the other camps in the hold?”

“Not just the hold if I have to.”

More silence. The bandits looked at each other. Their leader flourished her hammer. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll spread word to the other camps. When does your Jarl need this to happen?”

“Exactly a month from now.”

“Say that we can do it in two months. We’ll have the depth of winter and an entire army to take down the Dragonborn’s estate.”

“Now *I* need reassurance that you’ll keep your word.”

“Look around you, crow. Do you think we haven’t lost any family or friends to that fiend?”

“A true Nord avenges his own!” someone shouted. Cheers and claps.

“Very well.” The housecarl dropped a bag of gold septims. “More to come once you have your army.”

20. *Helvard*

“We’ll see.” The leader grinned. “You could have just told us to gather and strike. Anything to get at the Dragonborn.”

“Too late for that, I guess.”

“Coin is good alright.” She took the bag and weighed it with her hand. “Especially when mixed with vengeance.”

“I’ll be off, then.”

Helvard rode back to his city, nestled in forested heights now orange and red. Colovians and Nords living together, worshipping Arkay and his mercy. No sight or sound of conflict since two hundred years past. A quiet ready to shatter when the war comes.

“Two months, Helvard? Are you mad?”

“My Jarl, they’ll have an entire army of bandits ready to—”

“In two months, the Stormcloaks took Whiterun. They can easily get to Falkreath with that blasted estate harrassing our tax collectors and caravans!”

“We could just have the legion at Helgen to—”

“The legion’s all tied up watching for rebels by Riverwood. Some of them even got shot at Ilinalta Tower.”

“Then I could just surrender my pay for two months.”

“Will you now?”

“Just let me get the bandits by then. Give my pay to the guards or to decorate the longhouse or fund scouts by the Lakeview.”

The Jarl hummed. “Fine then. You’ll go penniless for two months. You better get your bandits shaped up by then for the assault.”

“I’ll shape up the guards, too.”

“Let’s see you now with that military training of yours. Go ahead, take your leave. It’s time I got to other business.”

Helvard breathed out and turned to leave. The redguard Zaria was talking to an elderly man in front of her store. His eyes able, though his body frail.

“Helvard. Come to connive with Sidgeir again?”

“Thane Dengeir. Just some matters for the war.”

“Oh, so he now regrets getting the Dragonborn to do his dirty work. My nephew ought to stop pretending to be a strategic genius and actually be one.”

“The Jarl has plenty on his plate.”

“Does he, now? I swear I saw him frolicking by the stream yesterday.”

“The Jarl’s business is his own, Thane. I’m off to some business of my own.”

“Very well. I’ll be honoring my ancestors in the Hall of the Dead till sundown.”

Another few rounds of mead in Dead Man’s Drink. Helvard could still balance himself on his chair. Nothing bad that a few drinks could do.

“Serve’s up.”

“Thank you.” Helvard finished his shot, finishing with his free loaf of bread. “The way this war is going, you’ll soon have plenty like me to buy drinks,” he said.

“The way this war is going there might not be anyone left to drink soon.”

“Been slow lately?”

“Falkreath’s always been slow. Till lately at least. Now, it’s a patrol, or a marching column, or some supply caravan. Some merchants escaping bandits, some hunters stuck in a cave.”

20. *Helvard*

“I heard that, Valga!” an old hunter shouted from the seats.

“You know it’s true, Valdr,” the barkeep shouted back.

“Give it a rest, Valga.” Helvard sighed. “Whiterun’s gone. Falkreath will be next. I just know it.”

“Well you’re sorrier than I am.”

“Morthal’s been hit, I heard. Dark elf assassins in Solitude. Gods, what madness has—”

“Enough drink for you, go sober up at home.”

“Ugh. Fine. Let me pay for the—”

Helvard’s head started spinning and his hands shook as he reached for his coin pouch. He laid each septim one by one on the bar.

“Don’t push yourself too much. Go rest before you get back to house-carling.”

“Aye.”

Helvard steadied himself on the way to the Longhouse. Some guards opened the gates for him, helped him get through the path into the longhouse.

“Get Zaria to have a potion for me.”

“Aye,” a guard answered.

Stalwart guard of the Jarl now longing for sleep, the potion coursing through his body, his fatigue gone, only sleep till the sun rises. Bandits would prowl, a force gathering for his duty to the Jarl. Yet his body wearied, and his mind buckled as loyalty took its toll.

Olfrid

Lore-das, 8 Frostfall

Cloaks of blue with lamellar marching through his city's streets, his never dreamt nightmare made real. Olfrid could have asked his associates in the Thieves Guild to help his clan escape. Only silence had aired from Riften, however. Even after his support. He had heard rumors. Some members' bodies floating into Lake Honrich. He would not dare risk his stature to fall with another futile scribble.

"Stormcloak dogs. Come on and face me like a man!"

His son-in-law, wobbling from the Bannered Mare. Some rebel guards had already raised their fists. The Battle-born head shook his own and went over to him.

"Come, Idolaf. We Battle-borns know when not to battle."

"Let me have this one, father. Just this one!"

"This one, then you'll ask for another, and another."

"Never should have taken that Dragonborn's word when he first came here."

"Let that Provincial fiend do whatever he wants. Come on, now."

Olfrid took him away from the inn, to trudge through the main street leading gatewards.

"Gods damn it, father. I'm seeing how they're turning the city into a backwards pigsty."

"We'll have our house at least to keep clean in. No need to witness how Ulfric's dogs will do more than all this."

The sun had set hours ago, winter setting in fast. Some citizens still

21. *Olfrid*

hammered new planks, readied new mortar, sowed new curtains. The siege's scars would fade when its memory fades, Olfrid mused. But it had ended with Ulfric in charge, the turncoat Dragonborn leading his victory procession. They could move forward and only forward. Some miracle of the Divines could save them. Away from Stormcloak darkness. Mara's warmth. Kynareth's breath. Dibella's passion. Anyone's aid could help them all as Skyrim entered its winter.

They took three quarters of an hour to make it back to their home, nestled safely in the Wind District. No one had bothered to disturb them. Even the blasted Gray-Manes had their home used. Olfrid swore that he had seen it shake under magecraft. The Battle-borns, however, kept their precious home under precious care.

"Father, are you all right?"

His grandson walked up to Idolaf, head still throbbing.

"All fine, Lars." Quick drop to a bench, a fire stoking in the hall's center. Smell of mutton flowing. Everyone would be hungry soon.

"All right, everyone," Olfrid said. "We'll eat supper in a while."

"Can I have mead, dad?"

Idolaf grunted. "For what?"

"I survived the siege! It means I'm a man now!"

"No, we talked about this."

Olfrid laughed. "Come on, Idolaf. Let the boy get a taste."

"Fine, go have a glassful."

Lars smiled. "Thanks, grandpa!"

"Anything for my future legionary!"

The boy ran off to his room, waiting till called. Olfrid sighed and sat down.

“The boy will hate the taste, have no worry.”

“Future legionary? You shouldn’t fill the boy with futile hope.” A yawn. “The mead already gave him enough.”

“Let him dream, Idolaf. Even in darkness, the gods hear us.”

“Let’s flee North or Westward. Muster some forces, take back Whiterun. The Stormcloaks are spread thin as they are.”

“How would you know that?”

“Survivors from the Thieves Guild.”

“What do you mean, ‘survivors’?”

“The Dragonborn wiped them out a year ago. Only found out the other day.”

“What? Why didn’t you let me know?”

“Their latest recruits, a dunmer and a nord, managed to get into Whiterun. Told me about Stormcloak positions in Whiterun Hold. I had some runners vouch for what they knew.”

“So the Stormcloaks?”

“A few patrols by the gatehouse next to the crossroads with Falkreath. Dragonborn has an army in that hold, think they’ll try and move there next.”

“Makes sense. Gods know how many times I saw him go to and fro here and Falkreath.”

Idolaf nodded. “Their regulars, if you can call them that, have massed in Bromjuunar—the Labyrinthian.”

“Into Hjaalmarch?”

“Apparently they managed to hold Morthal for a while. The Legion moved in from Dawnstar I think, pushed them out.”

“Gods help us, they have men everywhere.”

21. *Olfrid*

“Doesn’t matter. The Legion and other loyalists could easily move in from the Reach and the Pale. Heard the Pale Pass had cleared too, maybe some veterans from Cyrodiil.”

“Wait, wait, Idolaf, why have you been making a fool of yourself lately if you knew all this?”

“Played the fool, you mean. Today, though, I was celebrating too much. Never should have tried to jockey with Ulfric’s dogs, I give you that old man.”

“Boys,” an old woman’s voice called out. “Enough serious talk, let’s have supper.”

They gathered by a table, forks and knives and plates served with roast mutton. Bergitte—Olfrid’s wife—had an eye and taste for good cooking. Even in dreary straits. Olfrid’s daughter Alfild was helping Lars with finishing the glass. He smiled. They had all gathered there, one family eating peacefully in a time of war. All except one.

The door opened, a blonde man with sombre eyes stepping in. Snow had fallen again, and he shook his boots before removing his coat. Olfrid’s son, a bard in wanting, should have moved to Solitude before this entire mess.

“You’re late, Jon.”

“Apologies, father. Just had business to attend in the Bannered Mare.”

“Well, your mother’s cooking has been waiting.”

“Oh, Olfrid, no worries. Come, Jon, join us.”

Move of chair, the same patter of utensils and plates, sound of meat torn and dropped. An eerie silence.

“Any luck with playing at the Mare, Jon?”

“Of course. Just that sleazy Mikael trying his luck again.”

A hearty laugh. "That skeeverbrain wouldn't know good music if he wrote it. Soon, you'll be playing in Dragonsreach."

Jon started coughing, reaching for the rest of Lars' mead to down his food.

"Come now son, not an impossibility, is it?"

"Of course, father." Jon's voice trailed as he finished.

"Well now, we could have a song right now! To cheer our hearts."

"Dear, let him finish his food first."

"Well mother, guess I really should have come earlier."

Another hearty laugh. "Oh, Jon. Maybe I'll threaten Vignar to send Olfina with a caravan with you in a prime carriage to Solitude."

"Come now, father." Some redness on Jon's face. "Spare the clan from more mischief while Ulfric tries his luck."

"Very well. Winter should be quiet for all of us."

They kept quiet, as one by one each excused himself from the table. Jon retreated to his room, always quiet and studious. Lars ran off back to tales of Breton knights and Altmer mages. Alfhild and Idolaf went to their own room, a simple place. Only Olfrid and Bergitte remained by the dining table.

"Still suspicious of him?"

"Suspicious of what?"

"You know."

"You mean with the Gray-Mane lass? I've looked into it. Only found out that they talked a few times in the Bannered Mare."

"Maybe Alfhild's been encouraging him. She always kept friendly with them."

"Woman, it's getting late. No need to keep us with tall tales."

21. *Olfrid*

“I’m just telling you, dear. The Dragonborn showed us that people aren’t always who they seem to be.”

“We’ll see.”

They went up to their room, the last light of Imperial loyalty in this new Stormcloak cesspool. Usurpers would rise and fall, but the clan would stay strong to the end. Loyalty and honor kept it that way.

Annekke

Morn-das, 10 Frostfall

She went outside their house, looking over to the wooden bridge connecting Darkwater Crossing to the road headed to Riften. Three years ago, the Dragonborn had been caught crossing from Eastmarch through the Rift's border, a loyalist ambush lying in wait for Ulfric Stormcloak's retinue to come. Three years since the day that sealed Skyrim's fate.

"Verner, a little help with the firewood."

"Let me get my axe first. You know where it is?"

"Placed it by the rations delivered from Mistwatch, sweetheart."

"Aye, some help finally."

"Snippy icebrain."

A banner draped those rations. A dragon totem pierced by a sword plunged downwards. Her son-in-law's, the same man caught in the ambush, now Thane of Eastmarch, the old keep and surrounding unused lands awarded to him. Their little miners' town under his watch and guard. In exchange for a little ore of course.

"What know you of the lands beyond, little Lucia?" she asked in a new red dress'.

"Mammoths, giants, and steam vents, grandma."

"Maybe you'll grow up strong like your father. We'll go on an adventure near them."

"Fighting is fun only when papa does it."

"No need to fight, little one. Just see the sights, take a few trinkets

back home.”

“I can go on an adventure to his castle and back,” she said, giggling.

“And why not? Let’s see the lakes and springs and the craggy roads. They don’t call me ‘crag-jumper’ for nothing.”

“You have work to do, grandma.”

Annekke sighed. “That I do, little one.” She kissed Lucia’s forehead, ruffled her hair. “When will you get back to Falkreath?”

“Papa says he’ll do some fighting there.”

“Oh.”

“Grandma, why does papa fight so much?”

“You said that it’s fun if he does it.”

“It is, but why?” She looked up to her, her eyes pleading. “It’s also fun to stay at home with mama, and he keeps telling me not to fight with Sofie, too.”

“Well,” she cleared her throat. “Elders sometimes have no choice but to fight. You young ones are lucky, always having other choices.”

“But why can’t they stop fighting?”

“I’ll tell you later, dear. I have work to do, after all.”

Work in the mines for some pounds of Corundum daily. The hit of iron to rock, the crack when stones split, the thud when ores finally fall. Everyday, from when she had founded the mine to when the war had begun to when her daughter found a husband to when her town started paying dues to Mistwatch for protection against waylayers and robbers. All this progress. That they had attained through drudgery in stone and sweat. Food on the table, some scraps of luxury. Yet she still longed for novelty.

Work ended early, for they had learned how to mine the same amount

in less time. The Dragonborn's aid, when he had lived here before the ambush. She had asked him to do some adventuring too, when he had returned carrying letters from Sylgja all the way from Shor's Stone. Some bandit leader robbing travelers with a gang. Stuck out in Lost Knife Hideout, to the south. He had told the story, locking the leader in the pit there. Releasing their beasts onto him. Watching as he lost his limbs and flesh to hungry animals trapped and killed for sport and leisure. He had been called Zeran, and was writing a note to someone named Nubia when he came on him. She remembered every detail, she felt the thrill from remembering what he told. Adventurers longed for it, until it ended with the job done.

"Grandma, let's go to Mistwatch Keep with the caravan."

"Alright, dear. Do you think you're suited for an adventure?"

"Let me wear some adventurer clothes first."

Just a belt with pouches and a dagger, blunt. Enough for the girl's home in Eastmarch. Sylgja took some water from basin and washed her face. Her husband would love this, she thought.

"Come on, sweetheart. It'll be fun!"

"I don't know. Winter's coming in full now. Heard that they had to clear the new road when they brought our foodstuffs."

"The more that we need you. Lucia's going home with the caravan, and they could use some extra help."

Verner smiled. "You always know how to convince me."

The old warrior put on his mail and his fighting axe, his spear only for hunting beast or man. Annekke knew that no one would dare to cross the Dragonborn's people. Only the most brazen.

"Let's go, to Mistwatch!" Lucia cheered. The old couple laughed.

"Easy there, little one," Verner said. "You might let your grand-

mother's excitement kick in again."

"Hey!" Annেকে said, pouting.

"Grandma can use some fun time to time."

"See dear, even our granddaughter gets it."

Workers from the crossing and from elsewhere in Eastmarch had dug up and filled the road, a year ago when Junius had received his fief. A reward for services rendered. Catching a mad killer in Windhelm. Taking down bandits by a shipwreck. Clearing looters desecrating Yngol's Barrow, where Ysgramor buried his son. Helping the Stormcloaks in his escape from Helgen, three years ago, after the ambush. Then word had reached her that Junius had sworn fealty to Ulfric himself. Sylgja had told her, of course. She had been there, with the rest of his warband. Their station in Darkwater Crossing had since risen.

"Grandma, how do you jump across this crag?"

A small cliff off the road's edge. Verner sighed, and Annেকে chuckled.

"Let's go together, little one."

"Yay!"

"Wait, don't—"

The crag-jumper took her little Lucia on her head and she jumped off the cliff. Only a couple feet high, no big deal. But the world for Lucia, who laughed after she tumbled along her grandmother through the grass.

"Gods, you two are a handful."

"Aw, grandpa. We weren't hurt."

"Even so. I promised your father that I'd take care of you while he's gone."

“Hmph. Fine. I guess elders have to be followed.”

“We’re having a talk too, Annekke.”

“Alright, alright.”

Their trek went smooth and their pace kept steady. The caravan had fallen a little behind, yet they kept in sight. Enough for their joy to reach them when they saw the Mistwatch appear over hot spring mists.

“Grandpa, grandma, you should try one of the hot springs that papa built up for us.”

“Really now,” Verner said.

“Sounds fun,” Annekke said.

“Guess we could use some rest after a day’s work, huh.”

“Exactly, Verner. A little rest, then we can head back tomorrow.”

“Alright. Anything for my little flower.”

“I’m not a flower!” Lucia said. “I’m a bee who will sting anyone who will hurt papa or mama or my sister.”

The old couple laughed.

Two guards acknowledged the Dragonborn’s in-laws, his adopted daughter skipping ahead. They came upon a pavilion, hot steam rising. Annekke quickly made ready and leaped inside, hot water splashing.

“Always the excited one.”

“Get in! The heat may just melt your snippy brain.”

The couple lay there for what seemed a day. The day’s work and toil quickly drifting away, the water cleaning her body and mind. This was an adventure’s best part—enjoying its fruits.

“Dear, we still need to talk.”

22. *Annekke*

“I won’t involve Lucia or Sofie in dangerous activity.”

“Not just that.” Her husband grimaced. “We’re not what we were before. It’s time you accept that.”

“I know, Verner. It’s just that.” Annেকে paused, then frowned.

“In my younger years I’d join the Dragonborn in storming Whiterun and beyond.”

“Gods know how hard you pleaded me not to join him or Sylgia.”

“But we’re not him or our daughter. It’s their time now to do what we did. Even more.”

“Well, I did found Darkwater Crossing. Guess they can found their own kingdom.”

“Watch your tongue in Stormcloak lands. Who knows who could hear you.”

“Alright, dear. Let’s get some bites.”

They ate and they drank the rest of the day, merriment before the Winter fully set in. Now would come toil and scarcity and rations. Yet the gods would provide. Junius and Sylgia would. Their own work, their patience. Then Darkwater Crossing could be its own proper town, and many would see where the Dragonborn had begun his journey. Where Skyrim had begun anew.

But for now, Annেকে relished in her moment’s delights.

Hrongar

Tir-das, 13 Frostfall

Two carriages, canopies recently varnished and tailored, cushions sitting everyone comfortably. A third, carrying off gold and jewelry and weapons. Exiles longing for a new home. The Jarl's brother, resting on sheets drenched with old perfume. A sickening sweet scent out of place with their fortunes. Their luxury out of place in their savage environs. Rough cliffs, rushing rapids, occasional rockfalls. And savage locals.

"You think we can reach Dragon Bridge before snows get heavy?" he asked the man sitting beside him.

"I only managed the coin back home," he answered.

"Well, Proventus, someone with your brains can definitely figure out how much longer we have to stay here."

"I wasn't the one who made that Dragonborn thane in the first place, at least."

"Watch your tongue, Nibeneyan! He gave you that job in the first place."

"Couldn't have hurt to listen to me about an outsider."

"Nords always listen to their hearts. Especially with someone with the voice in front of them."

Their carriage rocked as they passed over a bridge. A stream leading to the Karth River. Their road leading to safety. At least Hrongar hoped. They had fled in haste when the city fell. Rebels and bandits reveling in banditry, the city in flames while they sacked and looted the Cloud District. Men killed, women captured, children gone to no certain doom. They had fled through the Underforge, where dark se-

23. *Hrongar*

crets had abounded ever since the Companions had saved Whiterun in the Oblivion Crisis. A hole to the plains outside, carriages waiting in the rain. A fortnight of trudging through former lands now enemy territory.

And there was Balgruuf himself. Hrongar had let his brother be the active one in times past. Yet now, the Greater Jarl lied lethargic in his cushioned carriage, drowning in food and drink. Hrongar, only a man trusted and listened to, now took up their reins, horse and man alike.

“We should be out of the Reach in a while, sire,” the legionary peddling their carriage said.

“What of that gorge over there?” Hrongar pointed to a pass, crossed by a hanging bridge. Some watchtowers, armed men. What looked like a house fenced with a palisade.

“Not so sure, sire. We’ll see once we get there.”

The carriages pulled to a halt in front of waiting men brandishing hammers and axes. Their grins and snickers only paled to their number.

“You interfere with carriages under the Imperial Legion’s protection!” a legionary said.

“Legionaries, aren’t ya? Mind paying the toll here before passing?”

“You extort us at your own peril, knaves.”

“Knaves, isn’t it? True that may be, that won’t pass as our payment.”

“You won’t get any gold from us,” Hrongar shouted from his carriage. “Scram! Before we draw our blades.”

“Not a good idea, Hrongar,” Proventus said.

“No Nord will pass up this challenge.”

One of the bandits nodded to someone on a watchtower. A sound of twisting gears, then rumbling.

“What in Oblivion?” a legionary swore.

Boulders and gravel and dirt rolling around them, legionaries smashed to bloody pulp, the carriages buckling and falling sideways.

“Damn them to Oblivion,” Hrongar shouted. He drew his longsword and rushed outside for a bandit. They clashed and sparks flew and the Jarl’s brother stepped to the side and he thrust for his foe’s neck yet the bandit parried and he swung at Hrongar so the latter ducked and he dodged an arrow shot and he tackled the bandit down. His foe caught as a human shield, Hrongar glaring at his would be captors. Yet the shout of a hundred voices showed them that others also wanted to engage.

“Tiocfaidh ár lá!” Cries suddenly shouted from around them. Then the arrows swooped in.

Hrongar pulled his foe down to shield himself. The other bandits fell in one volley, arrows piercing all their parts. An ebony arrow went through the bandit and nicked at Hrongar’s hand. He quinned and he dropped the bandit, who had been crying in pain.

“Gods damn Forsworn!” he shouted.

Four archers with antlered helmets peered over the Western gorge, loosing at Hrongar. Blasts from a carriage burned them.

“No one will take the Jarl’s life now!” a dark elf woman shouted.

Hrongar took to the cliffside as flame and spark blasts loosed to the assailants. An arrow bit his side, armor stopping it. He took a knife and threw it to the East, a man falling to the road afterwards.

“I’ll keep them busy, Hrongar!” the dark elf shouted.

“My thanks, Irileth!”

The Jarl’s brother scaled the cliffs and when he reached the top two foes with sword and dagger greeted him with a flurry of strikes. Hron-

23. *Hrongar*

gar parried the first and he fainted to the other so he could step aside and he bashed his pommel into the first foe's eye yet his chosen foe blocked to stab with her dagger so Hrongar grappled her, a throw down to the road. The second threw his dagger at him yet Hrongar rolled away and he thrust at his foe, who dodged away and hit Hrongar's sword. Hrongar fell for his bait and he raised to swing so his foe dived down for a thrust to chest. Hrongar gasped for air and he stumbled backwards when his foe aimed for a chink in armor. Longsword parrying saber, follow-up to his foe's eyehole. Hrongar fell to one knee and breathed in. The day was far from ending, the sun just above the horizon.

"Get the Jarl, Irileth."

"He's right here."

His elder brother laid down on salvaged cushions, the steward tending to his wounds. Smell of drink in the air. Their party's survivors far from any help.

"You think we ought to move back for Rorikstead?"

"By Shor, no. Who knows how many Forsworn are on our trail."

"Then onwards to the River Frost."

"Aye. But we need to get there fast."

Hrongar looked at his brother, concern showing through his grit teeth and clenched fists. A sigh, relieving some tension. The day was far from ending.

He took him over his shoulder and moved on. They started marching and they kept marching through the road, the only stone structure for miles. Dragon Bridge and Frost River were a day's march away. He could get some Frost River Mead after all this, perhaps.

"Damn guardsmen could have at least joined us in our little retreat."

“Come now, Hrongar, the city still needs protecting even in rebel hands.”

“A little crime could let us take it back, don’t you think Avenicci?”

“Not really a good touch for citizenry.”

“They could take it. A little sacrifice for the Empire.”

“Proventus, let him take out his rage. He needs it.”

He needed more, the Jarl’s brother thought. More than he cared to show either the dark elf woman or the Nibeneyan bootlicker. Whiterun’s loss, the Empire’s loss, Skyrim’s loss. All for that Ulfric’s thirst for power.

At last they came by the crossroads bridging the Reach, Hjaalmarch, and Haafigar. Nightfall had already set in, winter’s short days at hand. Frost River and its village sat here. Some apprentices from the College of Winterhold had set up its meadery, and Hrongar had a taste in the Bannered Mare. Only Honningbrew Mead was better.

“Let’s alert some guards that we need passage to Solitude,” Irileth said.

“After a drink. We need some after all that happened.”

“You can go do that and let the Jarl rest. I and Proventus will handle our passage.”

Hrongar barged in the meadery and laid his brother down some chairs. A fever already, after a day’s worth of sleep. The two barmen in mage’s robes rushed to them.

“Anything the worry?”

“He’s just passed out, a day’s worth of travel.”

“Get some water, Borvir. Some potions of stamina and health, too.”

The Jarl laid on linen sheets, his brother busy downing some mead.

23. *Hrongar*

He had changed his mind—their mead was definitely better than Honningbrew.

At last he heard stirring sounds. The Jarl had woken up, and approached him.

“Where are we, Hrongar.” His eyes still swelled from his slumber.

“Almost there to Dragons Bridge.”

“What happened to our carriages? Our guards?”

“Bandits and Forsworn. Took them all out.”

Balgruuf shot up. “Irileth and Proventus?”

“They’re safe, just asking legionaries to help us get to Solitude.”

“By the gods.”

Balgruuf took a seat next to him, and reached for a bottle of mead.

“Not tonight, brother.”

“Night time already, huh.”

“Yeah. You were knocked out real cold.”

“As long as we’re safe here.”

“M’lord, you’re all safe here,” a barman said. “Legion’s got this place secured.”

“Aye, they’re holed up across the bridge by a palisade,” the other one said. Hrongar noticed now that they were identical twins. “Dragons Bridge itself is as if Castle Dour had a village within it.”

“Good to hear, good men,” Balgruuf. “My, you’re the ones who make Frost River Mead!”

“That’s right, m’lord.”

“Serving every inn or tavern from Haafingar to Heljarchen to Hroldan.”

“Whiterun, too,” Hrongar said.

“You’re from Whiterun? That’s a far journey.”

“Dangerous too, with the war and all.”

“Yeah, the war.”

“We escaped from it.”

“My, that’s quite a story.”

“Getting bounced on by bandits and Forsworn, too.”

“Aye.” Balgruuf laughed. “Quite a story.”

A knock from outside, followed by legionaries and militiamen rushing in.

“Jarl Balgruuf, have no worries.” A man in Haafingar’s guard armor. “I’m Captain Aldis, commander of the city watch in Solitude.”

“By the gods, about damn time,” Hrongar said. “Let’s get over to Dragons Bridge now, shall we.”

The two men rose up, passing by the two barkeeps who just stood there in shock. They moved with their escort past the first bridge, onto the Imperial camp. Irileth and Proventus had stayed put by a campfire. Then they moved over the dragon bridge to Dragon Bridge. Magnificent walls surrounding the town, every amenity imaginable there. A secondary wall dividing the town between military and civilian quarters. Not as big as Whiterun, yet better all the same.

The Poenitus Oculatus stayed in a simple cottage. Some Blades had signed up here after the Concordat. Now the retinue would sleep here for the night.

“I hope my children are okay in Dragonsreach,” Balgruuf said.

“Quit worrying about them. Vignar won’t find them. Our servants there will take care of them.”

23. *Hrongar*

“He’ll ask a king’s ransom if he ever does.”

“We’ll sneak in and fight for them if we have to.”

Balgruuf retreated to his own room, the rest sharing one. As he drifted to sleep, Hrongar reflected on the day. The province has gone mad, he thought. All because of one man and his supporters. And that turncoat, too. He wanted vengeance at the right time.

For now, however, he kept vigil on Shor and his martial gifts.

Marcurio

Mid-das, 14 Frostfall

Falkreath's forests looked like an orange mass up above. His Akaviri armor kept him safe from rushing winds as his dragon mount swooped over the sloping lands, past the Brittlechin Mountains. Marcurio marvelled at Lake Ilinalta's sight from far above. He had been in many places in his day as a sellsword. The Dragonborn had hired him to join his growing party one fateful day in Riften. He had since found himself fighting for his cause—against the usurping Empire in Cyrodiil, against the blasphemous Thalmor in Alinor, against Nords even, when needed.

His passage over Lake Ilinalta took half an hour. He started descending when he spotted docks, a cabin built next to a dismantled necromancy altar, a stone road leading to a cliffside, walls surrounding a manor and nearby amenities. The sellsword turned Blade found his mark.

He landed next to the manor house, guards watching him as he stepped down and breathed out. He had flew for half a day, and he needed a drink. He started for the well to the West when a woman called to him.

"Have some refreshments with us, Marcurio," she said from the canopy.

"My pleasure, Rayya."

Some tables holding delicious foodstuffs, spiced wine, lemon water. An oasis in time of war. Yet everyone kept peace this winter. At least Marcurio hoped. In vain, he thought, when Falkreath's guardsmen tried to raid here. Pathetic as it was, the Jarl had been scheming.

24. *Mercurio*

Gods know if he still did.

“Our men by the Pinewatch bridge report some bandit movement, housecarl,” an Argonian bowman said.

“Probably nothing, Derkeethus. Spooked by us, I think.”

“I’ll keep watching by the western ridge.”

“Take some refreshments with you. Patrolling’s hard work.”

“My thanks.”

Mercurio eyed their exchange sleepily. Bandits still sneaking in winter. Snow would cover everything by next month. No bandit could take such pain.

“Maybe I’ll see Lake Ilinalta freeze over?” a woman said, oiling her plate armor and ebony longsword.

“Never seen you this curious, Uthgerd,” a woman in lamellar said, drilling with a glass longsword.

“No sights but mountains and tundra back in Whiterun.”

“You’ll love it in Ríften.”

“When I’m not guarding my purse that is.”

“Thieves Guild has been long gone. You were there when we took them out.”

“Still gotta be careful. Maven Black-Briar walking free. Gods know what bad that brings.”

Mercurio remembered what Ríften was like. Had never liked it there. First time he had returned was when they destroyed the Thieves Guild. Fire and frost and shock in those narrow corridors, stench burned away by the smell of burning flesh. Junius had other dealings down there, a dunmer merchant who had work for him. Mercurio had never bothered to find out what they brought.

The Blade's dragon hovered above and it swooped down to catch an elk in its jaws. Dragons. Marcurio had heard tales of them in Cyrodiil. Had never seen one, had thought them all dead after the Septims had died out. After the interregnum had killed off any cadet houses. After the Medes, upstarts with diluted Septim blood, came up the throne. He had never liked it in Cyrodiil either. Preferred the sellsword's life. More adventure. More purpose. Now he was a Blade. Junius had two surviving members executed for insubordination. A pitiful lot, those two had been. Had survived the Great War only to meet the headman's blade.

He also remembered the coded letter he had received, a year ago. *Count Desilus Carvain demands that Junius Silanus Draconis turn over a cache of Akaviri artifacts in Sky Haven Temple in exchange for free passage for the Knights of the Nine*, he had read after decoding it. Junius had marked a crate for delivery. Marcurio had ridden his dragon to deliver it. The Knights had gathered by White Pine Lodge, he remembered. About to cross into Skyrim through an airship. The Blades and the Knights had worked together since, to restore the twin worship of Lorkhan, under many names, and his champion Talos.

"Why did you come here, Marcurio?"

He jolted awake from her voice. A Nord woman, brown hair tied in braids.

"The Synod had too many rules, and the College of Whispers had too much daedric taint."

"You know what I mean, Marcurio."

Ingjard no longer wore the Dawnguard's armor. Only a leather jerkin over a dress.

"Received word in Sky Haven to come over here and help Rayya. Junius never said anything else, just to stay here for the winter."

24. *Mercurio*

“Rather cloak and dagger of him.”

“Guess we all need rest now.”

He had first met her when she had sought out the Dragonborn in Sky Haven. Isran of the Dawnguard had grown too overbearing with the vampire threat gone. The Vigil of Stendarr had started rebuilding, yet Jarl Ulfric would not let them near his allies’ lands, lest the Dunmer protest. Yet they who had joined Junius shared something in common—trust in this new Ysmir, Dragon of the North.

“You still won’t join the Blades?”

“Don’t really want to after the last group I joined fell apart.”

“The Dawnguard serve with Junius now.”

“For pay. Without vampires to hunt, they don’t have any other option.”

“You’re okay staying in his estate here?”

“A good way to contribute to his cause. The Dragonborn helping hunt vampires, now fighting a war by himself.”

“Not by himself. He helps the Stormcloaks.”

“You know what I mean, Mercurio. The Greybeards said it themselves. Ysmir, Dragon of the North. Who else has received that title?”

“If my knowledge of Nord tales serves me right, King Wulfharth, Tiber Septim, Zurin Arctus—”

“That last one just gave himself the name to blast Talos’s legacy.”

“But what are you saying?”

“We’ll see once winter ends.” Ingjard smiled. “For now, care for a walk around the estate?”

They proceeded outside the manor gates through the beaten path headed for the main road. A stone cabin, troops in Windhelm’s lamel-

lar over mail and blue tunics. Rorikstead's famed warrior, now in wolf armor and a cloak bearing Ysgramor's axe. Marcurio knew about the caves below, nor furbished and furnished. Where their number rested after raids. His face twisted when he saw the overlook bridge ahead. An arrow had nicked his side before the Dragonborn and his housecarl wife had avenged his wound.

"What's wrong?" Ingjard asked.

"Got a bad wound nearby, fighting bandits."

"I'm sure you killed them all."

"Pain won't leave my memory."

"Lighten up." Ingjard grabbed his arm and pulled him to the forest.
"Real peaceful here."

"For now."

"That's not how you lighten up, Marcurio."

"Mercenary's life was tough. Never realized that till I got security with the Blades."

"See? No need to be down. We got companions now."

"Yeah. Just wanted to look back, don't know why."

The orange mass coloring winter's approach. Animal sounds far off. No sound of battle, no cries, no screams, no clash of steel. Only the estate's safety.

Galmar

Fre-das, 16th Frostfall

“Windhelm has nothing on this city.”

Their king’s housecarl took another large mug of mead from Hulda’s bar. Men around cheered as he finished it in one go.

“All the mead courtesy of Honningbrew Meadery!” he cheered.

“Hail!”

“Long live Honningbrew!”

“The Stormcloaks’ choice!”

The revelry faded, and patrons started leaving as midday neared. Galmar sighed, and turned to the man beside him

“Alright old man, pay up.”

“Of course.” A pouch of gold and silver septims. “Thank you for promoting our establishment.”

“The pay is good, and so is the mead.”

“And remember, the Stormcloaks are always welcome to—”

“Yes, I’ve heard enough.”

The Nord nodded, and left. Galmar yawned. His winter quarters had never been so comfy. A room in a large castle atop a hill.

“Welcome back, Galmar.”

“Aye, Vignar. How’s Jarling?”

Vignar called out from his throne, far away from the door.

“Better than being cooped up all day in Jorrvaskr, that’s for sure.

How's city affairs?"

"Did some promotion for the meadery outside. I'll say, Frost River Mead tastes better."

"Don't let Sabjorn hear that."

The two exchanged laughs at the dining hall.

"So Ulfric told me that he didn't want to skip happily all the way from Windhelm to here. Well I said, you'll neither be skipping nor happy, I'll have some guards put you in a bag and bring you there."

"Blasted jokes, Galmar!"

Another round of laughs as servants served wine and mead.

"Now these are winter quarters, Vignar. Definitely better than some camp amid snow."

"You should come here more often once the war ends. So many gods damned rooms that Balgruuf never used."

"We could fit all of Windhelm here maybe."

"Careful now, we don't have enough mead to keep them all drunk."

"Just use city taxes to get some from Honningbrew."

"My, Galmar! We should reserve the best mead for Skyrim's best citizens."

"You're right. Use the hold's taxes and get some Black-Briar mead."

Their laughing reached Dragonsreach's furthest corners. The wizard Farengar grunted, closed his door. Some guards rolled their eyes.

"Olfina's getting along with that Battle-born lad better now, what with Stormcloak patrols shielding their dates."

"A story fit for a fine tune when fighting's done."

"I can't wait to see the look on that Olfrid's face if he ever found out that his son's meeting up with a Stormcloak shield maiden."

25. Galmar

“Aye.” Galmar downed a pint of Black Briar mead. “Wartime’s always good for new life to replace casualties.”

“Don’t let the Battle-borns here that, Galmar!”

More laughter as the two city leaders drank the rest of the day away. Night fell early for winter had come in Whiterun, snow falling every now and then, sometimes to waist height. A pleasing calm before they would return to campaign. Before the awful fighting would begin again.

They had saved the city from Imperial clutches that Balgruuf had welcomed. Whether 50,000 legionaries, guards, militiamen, no force could have kept Whiterun from King Ulfric’s rule. No Poeniti Oculati could have predicted their moves those months ago. Galmar smiled, lying on bed that night. Taking Morthal spooked that Tullius, he thought. He had known that the general could not afford any Stormcloak presence near Solitude. Not even a decoy force.

The Imperials had sent their best to ambush Ulfric. The best in the field, not behind a desk. Whoever had decided to keep Tullius in Solitude, Galmar needed to thank him. Only average commanders led the loyalists in the field for Tullius was stuck dealing with paperwork and stamps. A final chuckle, before Galmar drifted to sleep.

The market square held many souls buying and selling. Many roads led to it, many houses lining them. Stalls and stores in houses, in front of houses, next to each other and far away. Galmar could take half of whatever he wanted there, and he would still have more to bring home than what the Windhelm sellers ever sold.

“Ripe fruit and fresh vegetables for sale!”

“Bits and baubles for sale, all crafted by the best blacksmith in Skyrim.”

“Everything’s for sale, my friend! You need visit no other shops to-

day!”

“Fresh-baked loaves, still warm from the oven!”

“Come and browse my fine selection! Everything’s fresh and delicious!”

“Ripe fruit and fresh vegetables for sale! Straight from the fields and orchards of Whiterun to your table!”

Hot smell of food mixing with the winter cold. Rowdy patrons in the Bannered Mare and peaceful acolytes of Kyne nearby. Going up to the Wind District, Galmar remembered to visit somewhere.

“Heimskr, everything going well?”

The Old gods’ temple stood strong, a proud fortress of faith in Shor, in Kyne, in Ysmir Talos. Away from Alessian taint, Elven corruption. Galmar had never visited it during the siege. Slipped his mind, he guessed.

“Aye, Galmar!” the old gods’ priest greeted. “The old gods and Ysmir Stormcrown bless you and all Stormcloaks!”

“I guess many have come since Alduin’s fall?”

The priest shuddered. “Say not that name!” He whispered a short prayer for the time-eater to slumber. “For your question, many have come for blessings and prayers. The old gods are strong among them, and soon they will be strong in Whiterun and all Skyrim!”

“Aye, that’s good to hear.”

Galmar knelt in front of the shrine of Talos, the priest murmuring prayers for blessing. The housecarl felt strength in him again, a fire to purge the Empire and defeat their elven puppetmasters. Nothing would stop them and Ulfric.

“Thank you for your time, Heimskr.”

“No worries! Come back with your entire army if you wish.” A hearty

25. *Galmar*

laugh as Galmar went back for the Plains District.

Midday came and the crowd quieted down, settling to eat and rest. Galmar himself yawned after a hearty meal in the Bannered Mare. He would do a round of the Plains District before retiring to Dragonsreach.

“Everything all well here?”

Some armed men stood in front of a house.

“The one occupying this house has debts to pay to our client. We’ve been trying to contact him since the siege ended.”

“Aye, I’ll talk to him for you.”

The house looked battered, some scorch marks still present from the siege. Galmar knocked on the front door. No answer. Louder knocks, still no answer. He shook his head, and he readied his right hand on the handle. He shook the door till he heard snapping sounds. He barged in and found only a foul stench.

“By the gods.”

The one inside had been longed dead, crushed from debris. His head was a hollow bag of flesh and skull, eyes no more, nose and lips long gone. His body was stuck under a beam, collapsed from the siege no doubt.

“He’s dead?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“We’ll get in contact with Jarl Vignar to arrange something. Thank you for your help, housecarl.”

“By the way, who was the man?”

“Severio Pelagia, a farmer who took a loan to expand his holdings.”

Galmar stood by the house as the armed men left for Dragonsreach. No words, no thoughts. Only silent dread.

Helvard

Tur-das, 3 Sun's Dusk

"We were in the Valtheim Towers, you sees. Me and my cousin. Never hurt anyone, they all gave their stuff before they could get hurt."

They sat around a campfire in snowy grounds. Everyone taking turns telling tales about the Dragonborn. Helvard wanted to keep a deaf ear, yet started paying attention with the second man. Now was the fifth.

"Some folks were stronger than others, so of course we fled them. But him."

Murmuring and jeering, as had happened before. Any Nord would have dealt with bandits himself before. Yet times had changed, and Helvard's new allies had adapted from the shadows. Bandit raiding parties, bandit supply lines, bandit patrols, bandit checkpoints and outposts and lookouts. A few Nords here and there, some Redguards, some Breton mages, even a few elves of any color. All the able standup men had joined their armies, had kept to the fields and flocks.

"He tracked us to our hideout, started hacking at my friends. Could never forget how he swung his axe to poor Shodra."

"An Argonian?" Helvard asked.

"Aye. That he was. Came over to Skyrim to escape slavery. Had no luck with the Windhelm docks, but scraped enough elsewhere for us to have a life."

"How did the Dragonborn go about it?"

"Guards on the bridge hit by arrows. A lookout saw a party heading over us. We all went and rushed to meet them. Then suddenly, we

were just knocked into the White River.”

“The Voice.”

“Less a voice, more like a screech. My cousin and I swam ashore. Shodra took on the fiend. Lost his tail first, then his head.”

Helvard kept silent.

“Alright, that’s enough of me. Time for the boss to tell her story.”

The bandit leader cleared her throat, took her place by the campfire.

“The name’s Nubia. I used to be with the women of the hammer. Used to be. That’s till I found my dear Zeran’s letter, just by the gods’ luck.”

“Found it?”

“Over by the road near Fort Amol in Eastmarch. A crumpled piece of parchment, left to rot with the elements.”

“What did it say?”

“Warned me to stay away from him. I’ve been doing so, till now. He wanted a life with me once he earned enough gold.”

Nubia stared into the fire, her face twitching a little. “I rushed into a cave nearby. We called it the Lost Knife Hideout. A massacre. We had a pit there where we watched animals fight.” She sighed. “Zaran was torn to bits by beasts that tore each other apart afterwards. Think he was having a few rounds there when he came to end him.”

Helvard gulped. A bad end for anyone, even bad men, he thought.

“Well, that’s enough niceties. Why did you come here, crow?”

“Just checking up that you haven’t gone back on our deal.”

A chuckle. “I appreciate your concern, but have no worries. In a month, we’ll gather together and strike at that Dragonborn.”

“I see you’ve gathered many here today.”

The housecarl had ridden to Peak's Shade tower, by the crossroads from the main road leading to Falkreath. The tower itself was gone, only a few bricks dotting its former place. The bandits had used the stone for onagers, to be used in a month.

"Only a thousand. We could gather two more in a month."

"Whom did you contact?"

"Bandit gangs around the province. Those here today will strike head on. The rest will hole up in Shriekwind Bastion for a sucker punch."

"Hammer and anvil."

"Guess you could call it that."

Helvard kept quiet for a few moments. "You would really gather? All of you? Just for a chance to strike at the Dragonborn?"

"He has ruined many lives, many families. Even without the gold septims, everyone gathered here would have done so."

"Very well."

"What about you, crow? Do you join us for your Jarl, or do you have something against him?"

"For my Jarl, yes. But that just gives me something against hm."

He breathed in. "Three years ago, we heard of a new adventurer making the rounds. The Jarl had his steward write a letter, send it to him. He came to the throne and heard out the Jarl."

"That's how the men in Knifepoint Ridge were done in, I guess."

"Yeah. For his service, the Jarl granted him rights over fees and duties in the now walled estate. Man took a small part as his manor, the Pinewatch as a garrison after clearing it out."

"Lucky man. So many adventurers would kill to move up that fast."

A sigh. “So I guess he broke your trust in him? Joining the rebellion?”

“We in Falkreath honor loyalty in those loyal to honor.”

“Something your Jarl ought to hear, I guess.”

Helvard grimaced.

“We in our gangs stick to each other like family. Skyrim’s a hard place. No need to for bands to be ruined within.”

More people dropped by the place. Armed with hammers, maces, axes, swords. Probably scavenged from some dead adventurer, from some cave, from some ruin. A few with arms or armor better than even legionaries or guards or militiamen or auxiliaries. A good sight, one not even the Dragonborn could destroy in one go.

At last Nubia took her place in front of the gathered crowd. Some cheers and good faith insults.

“The crows in Falkreath paid us to enact our revenge. What a sight the gods gave us!”

Laughter, jeers against the Dragonborn.

“They’ll even pay us more once the others get to Shriekwind. I got 2,000 gold septims here—that’s 10,000 all in all.”

A loud, united cheer.

“Get yourselves ready by month’s end. On the second of Evening Star, we’ll strike at his estate, we’ll strike at his manor. And guess what?”

Silence.

“We get to keep whatever we loot from him!”

Cheers, shouts, screams, arms bashed against shields. Complete joy and excitement.

“I’ll chop off the Dragonborn’s limbs!”

“I’ll break the Dragonborn’s neck in front of his wives!”

“I’ll keep his wives and friends company!”

“I’ll burn his whole house down!”

“I’ll make his friends and family tear each other’s guts out!”

Helvard kept down a giggle, their planned abuse too violent for him to imagine. Only bandits could make them up.

“Get yer friends ready, and yer arms and armor. We’ll show the Dragonborn what happens when you mess with family.”

“I’ll gut and violate *his* family!”

Helvard stayed with the revelers a little longer, leaving once the glee had died down. The Jarl’s gold would be well spent, he mused. He could live on his savings and charity a little longer. As long as he could finish his job, fulfill his oath to his Jarl. They honored loyalty to those loyal to honor, and Helvard knew to whom he swore his sword.

Hadvar

Sun-das, 5 Sun's Dusk

Hadvar adjusted himself on his seat, outside Count Desilus Carvain's throne room. Servants and envoys and courtiers walked endlessly in front of him, going someplace he never thought or cared about. Cyrodiil and its twisting customs, meandering procedures, never ending bureaucracy. He had received an appointment to meet only by General Tullius's pen. Even then, the replies took weeks. Elder Council had given their approval for a legionary officer to enter Cyrodiil, then Count Darvain's Viscount had given his approval to welcome him, then Count Darvain himself had given his approval to meet with him. He had never encountered this when he enlisted in Castle Dour. Neither did the Dragonborn when he met with Jarls, or with Legata Rikke.

"Mister, uhm, Hadvar, the Count will see you now."

"Thank you."

Custom be damned that I don't have a blasted surname, he thought.

"Welcome to our fair city. What brings you to Bruma?". The Count sat on a throne of gilded leather, one that not even the Blue Palace could provide.

"Your highness, I—"

"Please, just call me Count Carvain. Even my lord will do."

"Well my lord, I come in need of reinforcement from Skyrim."

"Ah, you're the officer from Solitude. A good place, isn't it?"

"It is, my lord. Though I live in a village near Whiterun."

"Oh, must be a quaint place."

“It is.”

“Anyhow, I hear that you need troops to reinforce the Pale Pass from some rebels. Tell me, are they that strong that they could breach our walls?”

“Not really the Pale Pass, my lord.”

“Oh?”

“We need troops to reinforce all of Falkreath. Nords or Colovians would be ideal, but we need all the men that you could spare.”

“Well, I’m used to ruling over Colovians. Might as well add Falkreath to what I rule over.”

“My lord, Falkreath has its own Jarl already.”

“So I’ve heard. I also heard that he is the most incompetent ruler a hold in Skyrim has ever had, notwithstanding Potema or other crazies.”

Hadvar froze, cleared his throat.

“But no matter, Tribune. I will send your reinforcements.”

“Thank you my—”

“On the condition that General Tullius station his in the frontline, if ever the fighting resumes.”

“Uhm.” Hadvar scratched his head. “I will have to talk to him about it.”

“Very good, Tribune.” The Count stared a distance off. “Bruma might have been spared the Great War’s physical wounds, but the spiritual run deep.” He stood up. “The Empire may be in dark times, but recent events have taught me to focus on my own. Falkreath is Colovian, and Bruma Nordic, that is true, but the estates lost control over the former after the Interregnum, and our bonds here have grown thicker after being forged in the war..”

27. *Hadvar*

A brief silence.

"I will, of course, aid the Empire. I am her loyal subject. But Skyrim's war is not Bruma's war. Bruma's sons and daughters will die only after Skyrim's. Our shared blood means nothing if only one does the effort, right?"

"Of course, my lord."

"Alright. You have my leave."

Hadvar stepped out. After closing the door, he could hear a faint echo from the throne room. "I have told the Tribune what you asked of me, my lord. Talos and Saint Martin aid you. Shezarr grant you strength"

A chill, either from the winter or from what he had heard. Some Elder Council member, maybe.

He had no time to rest there, for he needed to rush back to Helgen. More improvements, more renovation, more construction. When winter would end, Helgen would be the main line of resistance against any offensives. Or so Hadvar hoped, as he stepped on the carriage that would lead him back across the Pale Pass.

They passed by the Jerall View inn, the Breton bard singing of Sir Melvin of Skingrad. Unfamiliar names, unfamiliar sights. The glory of Cyrodiil, now lost. Even if many Nords stayed in Colovia, Hadvar knew it was too different for him.

Faleen

Mid-das, 8 Sun's Dusk

"Is Calcelmo here today?"

The housecarl waited for the head guard, still sleepy from his night-time watch.

"Wizard wanted us to guard him last night, and he's all tuckered out now."

"Oh, shame."

Faleen sighed as she walked back to the throne chamber, standing guard for the Jarl. Nothing fun had happened in Riften since Madanach's escape. She remembered what had happened. Their thane framed and arrested. Granted a pardon after Madanach had killed the Silver-Blood man in broad daylight. He had usually visited Markarth only for some business with merchants or the Jarl. Then the murders had started. He had tracked them down, only to be thrown away in Cidhna Mine for his work. No wonder that he joined with Ulfric, the housecarl thought.

"Any trouble in the Imperial College of the Voice yesterday?" the Jarl asked her.

"Nothing but some Stormcloak sympathizers agitating the students," she answered. "Someone tried to throw me into the river with his Voice. The guards knocked him out before he did."

"Such a shame. The college already has trouble enough from the Thalmor for being Ulfric's base in his escapade before." He sighed. "The Empire might close it down."

"Ulfric studied there, didn't he?"

“Wasn’t satisfied with the Greybeards’ pacifism, so he signed up for the college. Marched off to the Great War with other cadets.”

“I don’t think the Empire will have it shut down.”

“But they sure will cut down funding there if they deem it guilty of harboring dissidents.”

“They never did. It was only a few agitators.”

“Some bureaucrat in need of funding will say otherwise.”

Sighs from both.

“The Forsworn have been rather quiet, Faleen. No word of their movements?”

“I’ve heard hearsay about them destroying entire legions and over-running camps. The guards must be real bored to make up those stories.”

“We never know, Faleen.”

“Some reports from the road to Dragonstar talk about more convoys and caravans from Hammerfell. Otherwise, nothing much.”

A few citizens held audience with the Jarl that day. Some complaints about the River Karth being too cool this winter, some complaints about delayed caravans from the war, some complaints about neighbors or rowdy citizens. Otherwise, nothing special. Faleen yawned as midday passed. A number had aired their complaints by then, and the housecarl hoped that she would have free time later.

She took a hearty lunch in the Silver-Blood Inn, a half-hour’s walk from Understone Keep. Rabbit and beef soaked in juniper berries before roasting. Nothing could disturb her then, not even if Calcelmo awoke and entered that moment.

“Frabbi, give me the usual please.”

The old woman’s complaining aired, then faded as she entered the

kitchen. The man who ordered his meal sat next to the housecarl.

“Fancy seeing you here, Faleen.”

“I could use the change in scenery sometimes, Nepos.”

His three servants flanked him, all already chowing down on cheap meals. The Nose himself had a simple stew.

“The Jarl keeping you busy?”

“Not recently. I’m surprised at how my duties got lighter in the war’s depth.”

“Aye. A little lucky you have less burden now.”

A chuckle. “Why? I’m sure Thonar’s death shaved off a little burden off you.”

“Well I serve my Lord now. I’m sure you know how loyalty is.”

“I do. But no heavy orders as of late. Jarl Igmund has a few enemies, but the Forsworn have been real quiet lately.”

“Cherish it while it lasts, lass.”

An awkward nod, and the housecarl returned to her meal. One of Nepos’s servants whispered to him, and he downed his stew before taking off. Faleen raised her eyes, shrugged, and finished her own meal. Markarth was quiet now, and she hoped that the peace would last. That the Empire would forge order back to Skyrim.

Brina

Morn-das, 13 Sun's Dusk

The city-fort of Dunstad Grove grew colder each day, more than it usually was in the Pale. Its new imperial governor stepped outside of the inn there, the Stumbling Sabrecat. Some Winterhold mages had commandeered it, now served their Frost River Mead there exclusively. Brina had herself some. A governor needed refreshments on the job, after all.

"Brina," her housecarl called out. "We have word from scouts by Heljarchen Creek."

"Any news on the Dragonborn's men?"

"Plenty of movement to and from Windhelm. They have an entire army garrisoned in every cave and ruin by the road."

"What about the Dwemer ruins?"

"That too, my lady. Dunmer have taken Irkgthand for themselves. Enough Redorans and rogue Telvanni to storm Dawnstar."

"Seems that the Dragonborn's been busy, Horik."

"Aye."

"Send pigeons. We need more troops here. Heljarchen Creek needs to fall before the rebel offensives resume."

"At once."

The sound of clashing wooden swords and legionaries forming formations rumbled in the keep's courtyard. Outside the city, auxiliaries and militiamen bearing ladders and rams, climbing up the fort walls under mock mage and archer defense. Nords wouldn't waste the win-

ter just feasting and drinking, Brina thought. They were too smart for that.

Yet Brina had known that these days would come. They had been training from Dawnstar to Dunstad ever since the ceasefire, waiting for the rebels to strike.

“You swing too far, don’t signal your move.”

“Aye, governor.”

“When you sidestep, don’t wait. Strike immediately.”

“Aye.”

“When you form a shieldwall, ensure that your shields overlap the other.”

“Aye, my lady.”

New legionary recruits. Some had joined from Winterhold after the ceasefire. Others were militiamen who wanted to rise up the legion. Still others were auxiliaries, wanted to taste regular legionary life. Still a little green after three years, yet more than ready to strike at rebels.

“My lady, we have a dreamsleeve transmission from Castle Dour.”

“I’m off to it.”

She lay on her cot, and the familiar mass of colors greeted her. General Tullius stood there now.

“Governor Brina Merilis,” he started. “I’m sure you know how dreadful our situation is right now.”

“Of course, General.”

“We have credible intel that the rebels will move into Falkreath once winter ends.”

“Falkreath? Makes sense. Don’t think they’d want to move into the

Pale early after winter.”

“Not just that. They might want to link up with the Dragonborn’s party in his property there.”

“He moved up the world rather fast. We’re trying to take out one of his, too.”

“Well I was getting there. I need you to send a probing party to Heljarchen Creek once winter ends.”

“Just a probing party?”

“To test how fast he would react.”

“But General, besieging and assaulting Heljarchen would do more good. We can get the troops by winter’s end, and I don’t think the Dragonborn would mind a few skirmishers hitting his walled home.”

The General hummed, his focus inwards. “Very well, governor, I’ll leave you to your own decisions.”

“Thank you, General.”

“Take Heljarchen Creek fast. We could use it as a base to take back Whiterun.”

“Of course.”

The transmission ended, and Brina returned back outside. The freezing air got more freezing as winter set in. Her fur coat gave enough protection. Her housecarl would keep her warm after dark anyhow.

“Brina, word from the General?”

“Wanted me to probe Heljarchen Creek’s defenses.”

“Sounds too cautious.”

“Tullius is a tactician, and he still thinks like one for the whole theater.”

“So you’ll do it?”

“I told him why his plan wouldn’t work, Horik. We could easily take back Heljarchen by winter’s end.”

“Even with all the troops they have?”

“We have twice the men they had to take Whiterun. We just need more to guard our flanks and rear against the others.”

“Then we’ll use the assaulting body to outflank them if they strike.”

“Exaclty, Horik.”

Winter’s air swooped in from the north. A cold strong enough to make even the Nord recruits shiver for a moment.

“Brina, do you think General Tullius could return to the field?”

“His hands are tied. Elder Council made him take the theater’s reins, and got his legati to handle each hold.”

“We could really use his leadership.”

“To deal with the Dragonborn himself, yes. But orders are orders.”

“That’s true, my lady.”

The sun set early, and everyone retreated to their quarters.

Gregor

Tir-das, 14 Sun's Dusk

His destrier coursed through the road from Windhelm, passing ruins and caves filled with Stormcloak garrisons. No loyalist host could ever pass through them, supply lines always an issue. Such is why the housecarl needed to hurry to his thane's estate, Heljarchen Creek. Defenses against any incursion.

He spotted the town by Lake Yorgrim's Eastern end. His thane's hall sat above a nearby hill, commanding gold and iron mines. Walls protected the land from beast or bandit. Yet a legion or a host would prove more furious game.

"Aye, lord Gregor is here!"

"Get him some food and drink!"

The housecarl stopped his horse by the stable and he leapt for the hall. A war party should have gathered there by now. Trusted friends across Skyrim, ready to defend the Dragonborn's estate.

"Gregor," a man in Ebony plate said. His ancestors had been defiled by a necromancer. Gregor had helped the Dragonborn defeat the fiend, and Golddir had sworn his sword afterward. "What brings you back here?"

"Call a war council," he called to the Hall's steward. Head for the main hall."

"Aye. But what for?"

"We have reports from the Hjaalmarch Stormcloaks. Forces in Dunstad Grove readying to march on us."

The council fell in from around town. A man in Blades' armor, two

Stormcloak brothers from Whiterun, some mercenaries turned officers, and the hall guards. They gathered around the table, and they thumped their blades for they met by free choice. The housecarl stood up and he downed his horn of mead.

“Thank you all for coming here on short notice.” He raised his horn, and the others raised theirs. Sitting down, he began. “Stormcloak scouts in Hjaalmarch have reported loyalist activity in Dunstad Grove. An entire legion has massed there, 4800 infantry. That’s not to say about 500 cavalrymen, or 2000 auxiliaries, or 200 shadow legionaries. As you can tell, we here are outnumbered. ”

“Can’t we report this to the Stormcloak leadership?” the Blade said.

“Well Faltheim, the Stormcloaks are massing in Whiterun and Riften for a spring assault on Falkreath.”

“We can levy cavalry from Whiterun. The Gray-Manes have hundreds of contacts there,” one of the Stormcloaks said.

“I’m sure your family can levy support, Avulstein. But how many men can they muster?”

“Tell him, Thorald.”

“The Gray-Mane family can muster 2000 loyal supporters and mercenaries. Around 500 have experience in shock cavalry. We also have allies in the Temple of Jhunal, with 50 mages from all over Skyrim ready to support us.”

“And the available Stormcloaks?” Fultheim asked.

“I can get more than a thousand to help us here.”

“Aye. Many know Thorald’s name. They’ll surely aid the man who survived Thalmor torture.”

“How many men are garrisoned along the road to Windhelm?” Fultheim asked.

30. *Gregor*

“We have 3000 men,” Gregor said. “We can get half of them to aid us here.”

“The Hillgrund clan can spare another 400,” Golldir said. “A token of our gratitude for the Dragonborn.”

“If we fail this defense,” Faltheim said. “Who knows what could happen.”

“Free entry into Whiterun,” Avulstein said. “I doubt we have enough men there to secure four hold borders at once.”

“Eastmarch could surely send more troops to us,” Thorald said. “I’ll write a few letters to Jorleif.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Avulstein said. “Galmar will excuse them to be part of the Falkreath campaign.”

“Still worth a shot,” Golldir said. “I’ll write a few more letters to some well-off families in the Rift. Zealous Stormcloak supporters, all of them.”

“Alright,” Gregor said. “Let’s spend the winter barricading and entrenching the town. Some fieldworks outside the walls, traps and mines and runes between them and us.”

A bell summoned the townsfolk to the square below the hall’s hill. Patrons in Nightgate Inn peeked to see what would happen. The housecarl galloped down the hill, standing his horse in display to onlookers. He cleared his throat and announced his plan.

“Men of Heljarchen Creek,” he began. “By winter’s end, a large loyalist army will make its way from Dunstad Grove and try to take our town.”

Murmurs and jeers. As expected.

“You wish your homes and lives safe from the Empire? You wish to worship Shor? Pay no taxes to worship Ysmir Talos? Live in freedom

and peace? At winter's end, you shall have that chance. But for now, men of Heljarchen Creek, I ask every one of you to aid in the town's defense before the loyalists come. Take your shovels, your mattocks, your axes, your pickaxes. We need them to build trenches and ditches outside. Officers will lead you in the morning. Just approach them if you want to help your homes and lives."

Shouts of approval rang through the freezing air.

"Winter is too cold to lay around waiting for the Empire to ruin our lives!"

"Shor have mercy on whoever doesn't help out."

"Mara keep our hands and hearths warm as we do this."

"Kyne, send warm winds to our workers."

Many set out to the snowy fields outside, digging ditches and trenches under the war council's direction. By the 20th, thousands of men from Eastmarch and Whiterun had come. Men from the roadside garrisons had also come, fixing the entrenchments and setting barricades. Mages from the Temple of Jhunal casted runes and traps in the maze leading to Heljarchen Creek. They would remain inactive till the depth of winter would pass.

"A question, housecarl," Faltheim said. "I've been studying the field-works. It's a labyrinth that leads nowhere."

"That's the point. Keep the loyalists misled in the trenches. Our troops will deal with them in short order."

"We have forces in Irkgthand, too. Hundreds of Dunmer spellswords and mages. "

"They're not due to do anything till we invade the rest of the Pale."

"I'll write a letter either way."

"Aye."

30. *Gregor*

The day passed, then the next. Heljarchen Creek then found itself awash in trenches and barricades. No army would be fool enough to fight in the maze, Gregor thought by the Hall's hill. Some older boys shot arrows into painted hay targets below. They wore old bone armor, dredged from ruins nearby. Everyone would fight and stop the loyalists' march or die trying. He knew he'd rather die than let his liege's home fall to his enemies. Their enemies. Skyrim's enemies.

"Don't aim too low," Golldir said while he showed them proper aim. "Remember to imagine an arc between you and your target."

He loosed an arrow from a little distance, hitting the target dead center, missing arrows dotting the target's lower side. The boys clapped and cheered when it hit.

Carcette

Mid-das, 15 Sun's Dusk

The Vigilants had dealt fine with that man in Dawnstar, who tried to restore the Mythic Dawn. The Dragonborn had led them to him. They had negotiated with the city guard to let them in, and they had come in full force to arrest the man. No daedric taint would come back in their watch.

Yet a dremora pirate sailed free in the Sea of Ghosts, stopping Imperial trade and naval reinforcements. All under that blasted Dragonborn's bidding. Carcette could not restrain her anger, thinking about it all. She slammed her fist on her desk, her colleagues taking passing glances before going back to their business. Many Dawn-guard had also joined his side after they fell apart, listless after the vampire threat. The rebuilt Vigilant headquarters could easily send men and ships to take the dremora down. Yet wartime orders kept them grounded.

She had heard rumors, of course. The Dragonborn wielding the masque of Clavicius Vile. Using Sheogorath's tricks against enemies. Consorting with dremora servants in battle. Allying with the heathen Forsworn. Speaking to Hermaeus Mora. Yet she never would have thought that a dremora pirate would harass the Pale of all places.

"By Reymon Ebonarm, we will catch him and banish him to Oblivion," she swore. A vigil looked over to her.

"Is this about the Velehk Sain situation?" she asked.

"Can it be anything else? We're stuck here with our thumbs up ours when we could be pledging our support to the Empire in exchange for snuffing that fiend out."

31. *Carcette*

“Keeper, let’s try bringing this up with the governor again.”

“Governor Merilis is too busy trying to snatch back Heljarchen Creek down south.”

The vigil hummed. “Why don’t we offer support to take it before turning our focus back to the dremora?”

Carcette’s eyes lit up. “Why, excellent idea!”

The Vigilants readied themselves in columns, about to march down south. It would take a whole day with winter and bad roads ahead, but Carcette knew that they needed the Governor’s support. No more daedric taint could ever infect Mundus after the Oblivion Crisis.

They passed Fort Fellhammer an hour after they had started marching. Imperial banners dotted its facade. Bandits had stayed there once. Carcette had worked with the Dragonborn to clear it, take the fort’s mines for the Vigilants’ use. Then the war had intensified, and the legion had bought the vigilants out. More funds for their activities, but one fewer base for them. Especially when the vampires had assaulted their headquarters.

The Dragonborn had signed up to deal with the rising threat. The gods knew whether he had started his pacts by then. But he had left to join Isran and his friends. Carcette shook her head, clearing it from her memories for now. The march ahead would be a long one.

Night fell, and the vigilants set up camp beside the road, passers-by passing through. Some travelers, some merchants, some Khajiit peddlers.

Winter’s freezing air descending, their camps feeling it fast. Carcette washed her hair, and some droplets froze before hitting the ground. She warmed her hand with magic and she combed her fingers through, keeping it straight and dry. Their vigil tonight was a quiet one. To keep daedric taint from seeping into Tamriel, to ask for

Stendarr's mercy against their enemies. No fights for now.

They had their share of raids and arrests before. They knew how to storm buildings. The battle ahead would be just like that on a large scale. If the Dragonborn really did consort with daedra, all's the more boon to Tamriel.

She slept that night with hope in her heart.

"Let me get this straight," the governor said. "You want to help us storm Heljarchen Creek?"

"Yes, governor," Carcette answer.

"Just my luck," she chuckled. "I was hoping for more troops to help us. But I'm guessing there's something in for you, too."

"We want permission to set sail and stop some pirates."

"I'm guessing it's that dremora pirate I keep hearing about."

"Yes."

"Alright. Help us in the assault once winter ends, and I'll give permission for you to board some naval ships and hunt them down."

"Thank you, governor."

Carcette left the officer's room, smiling. The vigilants would fight at last.

"We have our leave to join the assault," she said.

Cheers and whistles.

"It will take place in one month."

"One month?" the vigilant from last night asked.

"Any problem?"

"Velehk would cause more trouble in that time."

"There should be not much shipping this winter. Too cold, too dan-

31. *Carcette*

gerous.”

“Alright.” The vigilant looked somewhere else, then turned back to their Keeper. “I heard the Dragonborn fought all of Whiterun’s garrison in the assault.”

“Nonsense. No one can, no matter how strong. That’s why we vigilants band together, to fight daedra as one.”

The vigilant smiled. “Very well.”

“What do we do for the winter?” someone else asked.

“We train, we prepare. But most of all, we pray for Stendarr’s mercy against his foes and ours.”

That day, the vigilants rested from their journey. They joined the drills in Dunstand starting the next.

“Keeper, don’t budge in the shieldwall!”

“Aye, governor.”

She held her round shield with auxiliaries in a mock assault to the walls. Similar to scaling daedra worshippers’ houses, but riskier too. Some brought up a ladder. Others shot magelight to the battlements in a mock barrage. Carcette took her turn climbing, then bashed the defender in front of her. She parried and she swung and she thrust, till she slipped and fell on her back. A defender swung at her, mocking a beheading.

“Guess I’m dead.”

“The dead don’t speak, Keeper.”

Laughs and cheers. Someone helped her up, and she climbed back down.

“First time in a battle?” an auxiliary asked.

“Aye. We’ve only raided houses before.”

“Trust me,” a legionary answered. “Tis almost the same.”

They trained the whole winter, readying themselves for the coming battle. No easy task, yet neither was fighting daedra. For their foes would not rest till their princes had Tamriel in their grasp. The vigilants’ mission would take them everywhere, to do every task necessary.

Erik

Fre-das, 17 Sun's Dusk

The slayer of Rorikstead hacked his mattock to the dirt, helping dig a trench around the Pinewatch cabin. They always needed new defenses, he thought. Never knew when the loyalists could come barging.

A few cold droplets reached his back, making him flinch. Winter had come. Even this far south, where pine tress bloomed. By then, however, the pines had shaken off their leaves. Bare wood for miles around them. Grass already dying, and snow eager to take their places.

He never would have imagined fighting in war, back in his sleepy hometown. His father no doubt worried for him. Yet the Dragonborn had bought his services many times, and Erik had sworn his sword to be his man here in Lakeview. The cabin and some lands around it belonged to the slayer, a gift for faithful service. His father would love retiring there, making use of the renovated chambers below. But not in war, nor anytime soon.

After the trenches came stakes and pikes. Any loyalist fool enough to rush would get impaled. Both in front and behind. In the trenches themselves went vases and jars of oil. To burn anyone fool enough to take cover there.

The sun shone directly above them, and Erik wiped sweat off his brow. He needed rest for the time, so he left his mattock and he entered his cabin. Others had the same idea, and resting troops and friends lay on the cabin floors.

"You couldn't rest downstairs?" he asked.

"Chambers too far from the work," Uthgerd answered.

“Aye, and we want the winter breeze to cool us,” Mjoll said. Riften’s protector, till she and her husband had helped the Dragonborn take down the Thieves Guild. They moved to the Lakeview afterward.

“At least try to keep the place clean.”

Erik took off his boots and he inched his way past resting workers, grime on the floor. He climbed down to the basement, where more troops ate and drank. He sighed, and he entered the unhidden chambers. It used to be a nordic ruin, filled with bandits. The Dragonborn had tidied it into an underground keep. Clean rooms, clean halls, tables and chairs for dining, beds for sleeping. The slayer could use a nap, and so he did.

A dream of battle, of fighting. No glorious battlefield, only the labyrinthian sewers under Riften. Flame thrown against thieves, splatting against damp walls. The Dragonborn entering their layer with a key shaped like a skeleton. The smell of singed flesh, singed blood, smoking leather, smoking steel. The master thief in single combat against Erik’s liege. The slayer himself slicing tendon, his liege driving his axe into the thief’s side. The thieves had fallen from noble protectors against the corrupt that they had been for they had found it useful to work with their old foes. Erik had no regret slaying them.

Night had already fallen when he woke up. He cursed for the day had fallen to waste and he stepped back outside. Good enough defenses, finished quickly by others.

“I’m sorry you had to do all the work.”

They sat on tables by the manor house, feasting in winter’s coming.

“No worries, Erik,” Uthgerd said. “We all need to help each other in winter.”

“Aye,” Aerin said. “Just look at what Mjoll would have been if I didn’t help her out.”

32. *Erik*

“I still think that I could have helped out more.”

“Don’t sweat it, the work’s done anyhow.”

The Dawnguard woman had joined them, and the mage in the Blades, too.

“You can make it up when an attack comes,” the mage said. Laughter and cheers. “Junius was so sure that Sidgeir will. Not sure how he knew, but it’s best that we prepare either way.”

“You’re close with the Dragonborn?” Erik asked.

A chuckle. “He hired me in Riften. Working for him was fun, so I swore my powers to him.”

“And he’s been a great mage so far.”

“Well, I sure have experience in that.”

“I must say. Getting land from the Dragonborn himself. How’d it go?”

Erik took a bite of roasted venison. “He said it was for faithful service. Been with him since he hired me in Rorikstead.”

“Another mercenary, eh? Guess the hamlet life was too quiet.”

“Well, we Nords just can’t stay still. Need to go out and kill some beasts every now and then.”

“A fun life. Not something those in Cyrodiil appreciate much.”

“You an Imperial?”

“I’m from Nibenay. Got bored of life there, made a living shooting spells here. Joined the Blades since I had nothing else to do.”

“Guess we all owe something to the man.”

“I’ll say,” Mjoll said. “Got my sword back, got Riften cleansed, got a place to stay for me and Aerin over here.”

“Gave me the best fights and adventures, ever,” Uthgerd said.

“I’m sure you know what he did for the Dawnguard.”

The night grew old and they chattered and ate and drank. Erik smiled for he had fought with them for years. He had never been in closer company.

“The war doesn’t seem like it’ll end soon.”

Erik said as his companions talked. They all fell silent.

“My father is back in Rorikstead. Who knows what the loyalists have done there.”

“Aye, can’t wait for the blasted war to end,” Uthgerd said. “Less trade, less work, less wealth. Not much good for us folk.”

“I could do without military strictness in adventuring,” Mjoll said. “It’s always formation this, movement that. Not like fighting against bandits or beasts.”

“Definitely not like fighting vampires,” Ingjard said. “They’re predictable once you get to know them.”

“As long as the Dragonborn wins,” the mage said. The rest toasted in agreement.

“I’d like to have my pops live here once he gets older.”

“I’d like to taste some Frost River Mead straight from the source.”

“I’d like to get back to Riften without the Black-Briars messing around.”

“I’d like to get some peace and quiet for once.”

Laughter and chatter, filling the night. Peace and happiness, as winter set in.

Lydia

Tur-das, 30 Sun's Dusk

"Rear guard, fall back!"

The housecarl ordered for recruits to follow. Their boots stomped and their arms shook and they marched back, behind their main line.

"Vanguard, screen the line!"

Javelins and crossbows marched forth and they crouched in the thicket near Ivarstead, facing the town, thinking it a loyalist bastion. Lydia checked their positions.

"You guys there, get more space between you."

"Aye."

"And you, aim your crossbow higher."

"Aye."

"Main line, assault!"

Ladders sprung from the thicket, held by woad-painted berserkers now charging through the skirmish screen over to the Darkwater. They strut the ladders on cliff edges, lining up behind them.

"Alright, good speed. Get back to your old positions, and we'll do it again!"

Mock cheers and claps. They started again with the march, then deployment, then the assault. Many times before sun's height. The lunch bell rang from Ivarstead, and the recruits cheered for real.

"We'll see you all again tomorrow."

"Aye, housecarl!"

She yawned and she slogged back to town. Recruits had already scattered, had bought food and drink, had talked to local women. Some talk, some arguments, a few slaps here and there. Nothing showed them their main force in the assault next year.

“Was training hard?”

Arms grabbed Lydia from behind. She groaned, then laughed.

“Nope. They’re more obedient than you are every month.”

“I guess there’ll be no room for you in the war meeting later.”

“Oh boo, you know I’ll just barge in.”

“Might as well make it easier for you.”

She yelped as she felt the ground touch her feet no more. She could see all Ivarstead below. The recruits, the veterans, her companions, the Stormcloak leadership. Junius’s manse. The lands and farms and furrows and grazing fields around. All in the Throat of the World’s shadow.

They landed by the manse, bear-hooded commanders already sitting around a map. The Companions’ Circle, some housecarls, a few Blades and Knights of the Nine. Envoys from County Bruma.

“A pleasure finally meeting you, Dragonborn,” a man in Nibeneyan finery said.

“Viscount Carvain,” Junius said. “An honor to have you here.”

“The honor is mine, and all of Bruma’s. On behalf of Count Carvain, I extend Bruma’s fealty and allegiance to you.”

“And Jarl Ulfric?” Galmar growled.

“We extend our sincerest support to his Majesty.”

“Aye, Bruma sounds like a swell place from the look of it. Why a Nibenayan on the throne?”

33. *Lydia*

“Men,” Junius started. “Save the small talk for later. We need to deal with the invasion.”

“Alright, Dragonborn.”

Junius nodded to Lydia.

“We’ll take the fight to Falkreath once winter ends,” she said. “The pass from the Rift has a lone border fort, conveniently facing us. Intelligence from the Lakeview suggests that loyalist activity has not yet perked up there.”

“Still shaky from the Morthal assault, methinks,” Galmar said. “Marching into Falkreath’s backyard this way. Guess the Dragonborn’s rubbing off you.”

A smile. “Well, Ralof sent a message to us. Legionaries scurrying about in the Pale. Governor Merilis was also seen in Dunstad Grove.”

“An assault into Whiterun?” Aela asked.

“Maybe. Our forces in Heljarchen Creek should stall them.”

“The Whitewatch too,” Hjornskar Head-Smasher said. “Our cavalry militia can sally into the Pale.”

“Blast the cavalry,” Aela said. “They would have learned from the last time they tried moving from the Pale.”

“Aye,” Galmar said. “Station some crossbows and cannons. I’ll have Ralof spare some men, too.”

“Moving on,” Lydia said. “Our guards by the Crossroads Keep found no loyalist activity by the Reach.”

“Our Reachmen hold the Tundra Plateau,” Junius said. “They’ve been harrassing the legion in both Falkreath and the Reach.”

“I’m still not so sure about those savages,” Vilkas said. “What would they think about an army of Nords pouring into their lands?”

“We can think about that once we take Falkreath,” Lydia said. “Any thorn on the loyalists benefits us either way.”

She placed some markers on the map. “We have forces by Ilinalta Tower who have been skirmishing with Helgen’s garrison. If we pull them back to Helgen—” she put the markers there. “We can make the Empire think that we’ll strike from the north.”

“Get the Whiterun cavalry to sally into Falkreath,” Aela said.

“I’ll relay the whole plan once I get there,” Hjornskar said. “We have forces in Blackmoor that can pull back.”

“Draw the loyalists there first,” Vilkas said. “Make them think we’re drawing them in from Falkreath.”

“Then a backstab through the Rift,” Galmar said.

“Once we get into Falkreath,” Lydia continued. “The loyalists will be scattered and disorganized. Our irregulars there will add to the chaos.”

“And our troops in Lakeview,” Vilkas said. “I guess we should link with them once we take care of Helgen.”

“Then onto Falkreath City itself.”

“Aye, a good plan from the sounds of it,” Galmar said. “What of County Bruma?”

“We pledged forces to guard the Pale Pass and all Falkreath west of Helgen,” Viscount Carvain said. “That town has been arming up recently. We suspect an attack into Whiterun.”

“And if we take Helgen?” Lydia said.

“We will withdraw to the Pale Pass to protect Bruma from rebel attacks.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

33. *Lydia*

“What does Bruma gain from this?” Galmar asked.

“Bruma had to face the Oblivion Crisis alone, 200 years ago,” the Viscount continued. “Sure, Bendu Olo and his party pleaded the other counties for support. A few guardsmen from Nibenay and the Heartlands to help Bruma’s army. The Colovian Estates sent entire companies, sure. Baurus and Martin Septim led us to victory that day. But that day has past. Bendu Olo and his friends have faded from history. Titus Mede marched into the Imperial City with Bruma’s troops, and what did we get in return? Bruma’s sons dead under Prince Attrebus’s command. Littering the Red Ring in the Great War. Our only solace is Saint Martin’s intercession.”

Silence filled the tent.

“If that’s all,” Junius started. “I shall see all of you once winter ends.”

Helvard

Tur-das, 15 Evening Star

“Get the ballistae here.”

Six bandits walked in step, their three machines primed for action that afternoon. Snowfall had started there in Falkreath half a month ago. A lull for defenders, no doubt unaware of what would face them.

A lull, too, in the snowfall earlier that day. It should start in a few moments. As Falkreath’s housecarl and commander had known. No more perfect time for raid and ruin onto the Dragonborn’s stead.

“You sure the Dragonborn’s men aren’t expecting us?” the Redguard bandit asked.

“Aye, Nubia. Winter makes men weary. They long for rest in this cold.”

Helvard looked to his side. The men in thick blankets, bandit mages casting warmth to their companions, pack animals and war beasts grunting and sneezing in the cold. Yet they had endured worse. The Dragonborn’s troops wanted nothing but rest before the next campaign, Helvard knew. And he would break that rest for Falkreath’s safety.

They marched till a scout ahead whistled. The Pinewatch bridge in their view, Helvard thought. They had come from Peak’s Shade Tower through a rocky and hardy pass, avoiding the main road. Bandits always used them to travel. The housecarl knew how much trouble the outpost there had served to travellers and convoys before the Dragonborn had taken the property. Something to be grateful for, yet never good enough for the Thane’s treason.

34. *Helvard*

Helvard nodded to some necromancers, who heated the road's snows. Steam now spread over, carried by the wind Eastwards.

"Link up with the men by the ridge," Helvard ordered. A hundred men dashed across the road unseen, ready to give the housecarl's orders when the signal shot up. By then, the snowfall had returned, and Helvard smirked.

"Commence now."

Three mages shot magicka flares onto the outpost as the steam vanished. They bounced harmless off the towers, the lookouts already nocking arrows.

"As I thought," Helvard said.

Now a hundred woad-drenched berserkers charged forwards, their screams filling the air as arrows hit and bounced off them. They hacked away at the towers, lookouts throwing javelins and darts and boulders to no avail. Finally, a man in the Stormcloaks' bear officer armor took an arrow, dipped it in some paste, and lit it before loosing. A purple light from the burning paste shone above, no doubt to call for aid.

And now the men from the other side had their signal to assault the ridge.

The towers fell as the lookouts drew their katanas. A healer must have broken their fall, for they had jumped into battle against the berserkers instantly. Helvard mounted a rock shelf to see them fight. Brave swordsmen, and skilled, yet they fell one by one to the frenzied berserkers' axes. The healer herself was spared, probably to be one of the bandits' trophies.

The berserkers shot forward till a line of flame crossed through them. Helvard could smell a ting of singed flesh and noxious woad smoke, even that far from the fighting. Now that winged culprit hovered above

the mess of infantry, ready to unleash another run. A smile only came from Falkreath's foremost commander.

A twang of string, and a large piece of wood and steel was jutting out of the dragon's neck. Its mage rider levitated off as his steed and threw pure magicka bolts at them. He managed to make a few body parts erupt before arrows and fireballs scared him off.

"Gods smite him," Helvard swore. "To me! Charge!"

Their mages casted wards and their warriors erupted into frenzied cheers for their prize had now come into their reach. The thousand-strong mass charged through, their other brother and sister bandits doing the same from different points far off. Helvard smiled as he joined the charge, potions of health and stamina keeping his spirits high.

A company of Stormcloaks had already formed shieldwall to meet the still living berserkers, who now fell back to temp their foes in pursuit. The shieldwall held, and Helvard saw that they pay for it. His troops threw bottles of rancid wine at them, dousing them. A few firebolts were enough to send them screaming away, their wards failing. Helvard pointed at them, and they were torn apart.

"Death to the Dragonborn!" someone shouted.

"Death!" many followed.

Now the bandit mages levitated up, shooting bolts of flame and shock ahead. Only arrows answered them, their archers' locations now known and promptly burnt or shocked. Helvard could hear a few screams some distance away. The barrage continued as their foes scrambled to form up.

The lines clashed as mages loosed magic, archers loosed arrows, and infantry traded blows. Their foes were mostly Stormcloaks and militia, no fancy armor like the Blades or Companions, no fancy weapons, no

34. *Helvard*

fancy magics like that dragonrider earlier. The lines held fast for a long while. Helvard cried victory, his bandit troops cheering and pressing forward. Axes and swords hacked at the shieldwall, with spearthrust or swordjab answering sometimes. Helvard yelled again, and the bandits started chanting. Now they found movement forward, their foes steadily falling back. More cheers and yells, and even Helvard could not help smiling or chuckling. His mass of untrained forces kept moving on, axemen jumping into the lines, swordsmen thrusting, mages loosing magic behind them.

He broke into confidence as they gained ever more ground. He stopped to catch his breath as his troops pushed forward. He took the sight of victory coming.

Then he saw high ground around him.

“Halt your advance!” he barked. “Halt your advance!”

No one obeyed or followed, just jeers as the bandits rushed forwards. The housecarl tugged at some jolly fighters and bade them to stay with him. They only laughed before trudging on.

Then he felt someone swing at him.

Lightly-armored foes, quiet yet deadly, swinging curved swords whether from Hammerfell or Akavir or Morrowind. Some bandits saw them and rushed to help Helvard. The skirmish went on before Helvard had realized what else was happening.

He heard terrified screams, piercing through his ears as a loud rumble came nearer. His bandits had started routing, the stampede killing more than what they had run from. Helvard lunged at a foe, killed him, then turned to see what had happened.

Magefire erupted from the forest and heavy infantry charged from the high ground and a dragon circled overhead to raze the ballistae. Only one survived, its shot forcing the rider to flee. Yet this good news

paled to its price. Swordsmen cut a swathe through what bandits still had the courage to fight and die. They wore strong armor, wielded special swords. The mage from earlier led them, a spellsworn it seemed, wearing the Blades' armor. The Dragonborn's servant.

"Rally to me!" Helvard shouted. "Rally to me!"

Despite his pleas the bandits rushed away from their prize, survival and life now more important than revenge or ruin or trophies or anything comfortable or pleasurable. Helvard shook his head and made way for the surviving ballista. He pointed to the grove nearby, and bade a few bandits join him. A few did, and trudged with the ballista to safety.

"What now?" someone asked the housecarl.

"Hold till they rally."

Yet his forces there never did while under pursuit. One of the bandits shook his head and levitated, shooting flames at the ruined Pinewatch bridge. It cut off many fleeing troops, now forced to stand and fight.

No fight commenced, however, and a bloodbath took its place. Those routing lunged with frenzy, swinging wildly at their pursuers only to meet a stabbed organ, a chopped limb, a lost life. Helvard grunted as he observed what was happening. He and his party inched through the forest and found his first forces trembling and shrieking.

"Get up, all of you!" he barked. The reserve forces saw the scene and started mumbling and murmuring.

"Bah, you're useless! The rest of you, form up! The night's not yet lost, and the gods smite me if I let it be so!"

Marcurio

The spellsword raised his longsword and he swung through his foe's neck. The first wave of bandits had burned the Pinewatch bridge, and what foes remained now stood to raid the Pinewatch cabin. Marcurio wiped his sweat off his brow and he whistled to those present. Snowfall had started a few hours ago, and hot and cold at once gave him a queasy feeling.

"Start a retreat to the cabin. We'll try to draw in the next raiders to the caverns."

"You think we should send more troops to other parts of the estate boundary?" Mjoll said.

"Let the dragons patrol there for now. We can't stay here with the bandits moving over the ridge."

"Aye."

"Marcurio, we need to tell Rayya," Ingjard said. "Have her prepare the manor house's defenses."

"You run off to her."

"But—"

"Better that you're safe than me. I swore my life to the Dragonborn, and I'll keep it with anyone else willing. But you," Marcurio gulped. "You need to get to safety."

"Alright. Talos guide you all."

The hunter now dashing to relay for reinforcements, the others retreating for now. A few Stormcloaks loosed arrows by the bridge's ashes. Fireballs answered them, and they joined the retreat.

“You think we can dig in?” Mjoll asked.

“Have the Stormcloaks form a shieldwall.” Marcurio gasped for breath as they ran for the cabin. “Any of you who wants to, join them. The rest shoot from behind.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll take them from behind.”

The wind picked up that night and snow started falling, inches quickly on the ground. No more fires behind. Only its heat charging up the wind.

At last they neared the cabin. Marcurio took out a horn and blew a battle alarm. Troops present stood at alert and started forming up. The Dragonborn’s warrior companions joined their formation. Archers and mages formed behind and beside them. Marcurio stood by the cabin, viewing the ground. They had the high ground yet could lose it to those by the ridge.

“Faendal, lead some archers to the ridge,” he ordered.

“Aye.”

A quick dash up, covering their flank.

“You think we’re safe by Lake Ilinalta?” Uthgerd shouted, the wind muffling them.

“We have troops manning posts there.”

“You don’t think Mjoll should join them?”

“Aerin will be fine on his own,” Mjoll said. “Let’s take on the bandits here first.”

“Alright.” Marcurio took a deep breath. “For the Dragonborn! For the Dragon blood!”

A loud cheer among the troops, clashing their arms and their shields

35. *Mercurio*

together. They waited there for what seemed hours till the first bandits loosed arrows.

“Come and fight us with your hands, cowards!” a Stormcloak shouted. The bandits answered with more volleys. Mercurio readied a fireball and he loosed it to a distance. Screams and cries, followed by a wild charge.

The dunmer mages unleashed bolts and flames against them. Wards checked their damage, the charging foes rushing to meet the shield-wall. Only the spiked trench stopped their advance.

“Troops, form up!” Mercurio ordered. At once the shield wall split across the trench, ready to meet any bandit who could cross over. Ranged troops took more shots against fleeing bandits. Screams and gurgles, cries and burns. These sounds filled the night as the snow-storm grew stronger.

“Don’t let anyone across!”

“Aye!” everyone shouted.

The bandits loosed fireballs of their own, checked by Mercurio’s wards. The exchange continued for some time, till piles of grass and hay dropped in front of the trenchline. Bandit mages loosed flames at them, and a large smoke screened the invaders.

“By the gods,” Uthgerd swore.

“Keep here,” Mercurio said. “I’ll take them now.”

Mercurio rushed back to the manor house. He last saw planks dropping over the trenches, spears jutting from the fog and smoke. He ran over to a lumbering beast, its wings spreading as Mercurio came.

The spellsword rode up and trailed the ridge. Faendal and his troops blocked a large bandit company lodging itself through gaps in the wall. Mercurio ordered his dragon to unleash shouts on them as they flew over. He heard the troops cheering him as flames and frost devoured

the bandits. Arrow and spells charged for Marcurio, who evaded them and started another run. The bandits started fleeing and Faendal's troops charged in pursuit.

"You think you can get your men behind the main army?" Marcurio asked, his dragon hovering by the ridge.

"I can," Faendal said. "Just give us the signal to attack."

Marcurio nodded. He rode his dragon back to the pinewatch cabin. The Stormcloaks had clumped up to push back whatever bandits had made it across the trench. Mages burned the remaining planks, which budged not one bit. Enchantments to resist flames, Marcurio thought. He sighed and he crashed his dragon into the bandits. The force flung foes far out, the dragon biting and slashing at those fool enough to surround them. Marcurio threw bolts of flame and shock at them, drawing many to engage. Archers and mages met ice spikes, keeping only fighters and warriors to match him. At last, the spellsword blew his horn, a signal to attack. He ordered the dragon back to the air, fleeing any archers and mages remaining.

At hornblow Faendal and his troops leapt from the woods and they hacked at the bandits out of formation. Marcurio turned back and he drove the dragon into bandits forming up. Shouts of flame and frost tore at any bandit still stubborn to retreat.

Yet the dragon fell to a ballista bolt wedged into its rib. Marcurio fell from his saddle just as he readied another crash. His vision darkened while falling, yet his wits saved him and he casted levitate to land below. He steadied himself while his vision cleared, and he found an armored man by the ballista.

"Dragonborn's servant," he said. "We both serve our masters in this fight. I shall treat you all with honor and respect if you surrender yourselves to the Jarl of Falkreath."

"I'd rather go back to begging in the Imperial City than surrender

35. *Mercurio*

to you loyalist dogs.”

“So be it.” The man unsheated his blade and charged for Mercurio. The Blade pulled his longsword and parried the first swing. He sliced down at the man, who blocked and punched Mercurio. His vision clouded as the man boasted.

“A fine swordsman. Yet real fighting needs more than a sword.”

The man kicked Mercurio back and he drove his blade in. Mercurio stepped sideways and bashed his pommel into the man. He readied an ice spike and threw it to his foe’s face. The man ducked and gripped his blade like a spear, hitting Mercurio with the flat of his sword.

The Blade stumbled backwards yet he rose his hand to cast flames. The man shrugged them off and he swung his pommel at him. Mercurio rolled away and he cast frost to wall himself off. His foe hacked at the building ice.

“I never expected the Dragonborn’s servant to shield himself like this.”

The man flung a dart at Mercurio beside the wall of ice. The dart pierced his armor, stopped only by his gambeson. Yet the force pushed Mercurio back, the man readying another strike at him. Then an arrow bit the man’s leg, and Mercurio readied another ice spike. He casted too slow for his foe grabbed his hand and he locked it into a throw.

Mercurio came back to his senses as the man held something to his neck. “I have the rebel in my hands. Come out and face me if you want his life.”

Ingjard stepped out with a bow. She wore her old Dawnguard armor, and she readied her axe for a fight. Mercurio heard the man breath out through his smile, and a dart flew at her.

“No!” Mercurio screamed as he lifted his legs off and threw the man

over him. Another arrow flew straight into the man's chest, armor saving him yet the tip stuck between plates splinted on mail. The Blade collapsed down, exhausted from the fight. Ingjard ran over to them, meeting the man's fist as he stabbed her head. Her helmet made the blow graze, and they struggled in a clinch. Marcurio grabbed the dart that pierced him and crawled over to them. The man saw him and stomped his head. Yet in doing so Ingjard found an opening and elbowed him, collapsing down after he let go.

“Damn rebels. Falkreath will be safer without you.”

The man raised his sword, his hands shaking before dropping it. He grunted, and he retreated into the woods. All Marcurio saw afterwards was darkness, all he heard was cheers in the distance.

Aerin

He had gotten used to a crossbow's use long ago. Mjoll had made him learn. Never had aimed at another man, though. Tonight he had loosed a hundred bolts. A scream, a cry, a thud. He could get used to what happened afterwards. The raiders that had circled through the Lake Ilinalta road had burned the cabin near that dismantled necromancer altar. To scare them, maybe. Aerin thought of the flame as target marks. Raiders bearing ladders, raiders holding swords, raiders throwing stones. Aerin would treat them as he had treated the falmer who had tried clawing at Mjoll in Mzinchaleft.

"Movement by the lake!" he barked to those on the manor wall. "Aim at my mark."

A bolt enchanted, holding saltpeter and sulphur. A fiery blast, and volley after volley loosing. More screams, more cries, more thuds.

"Gods help us," a Stormcloak swore. "Where did they come from?"

"Keep loosing, they can't hold up for longer."

A runner dumped stacks of bolts and arrows near the defenders, who took a share each to loose back against their foes. Another ladder touched the wall, and Aerin took a boulder and dropped it where the ladder stood. A thud and splash echoed from below.

"We ought to win here as long as we keep up our shots."

"Aye, Aerin."

Even with his confidence the wave kept rising, and at last the defenders failed to keep their foes from the walls. First three bandits, then five, then an entire horde climbed up, pushed back desperate men thrusting spears and swords and loosing bolts and arrows against

those too stubborn and hardy to give up their conquests. Riften's sentinel had stabbed an overeager Redguard's throat when a wild swing hit his back. He swung back and he caught an Nord man's breastplate. He gave another glancing blow, which his foe parried to give a counter. Yet Aerin found an opening and he thrust straight through his foe's ribs.

"Rally!" he cried. "Keep the defense up!"

Now they left the battlements to form below the hill, near the manor house's back. Aerin threw a dart against a Nibeneyan lass wearing Ebony plate, who caught it with a spell. He marked her and leaped with a thrust to her side. She dodged and cast frost against his face. The Riften warrior ducked and tackled her, the bandits around them shoved and lumping in a mess.

"Now!" he barked. Defending Stormcloaks and militia guards broke from their wall and charged around the dueling ones, their foes banded cohesion now breaking at the renewed attack. Aerin himself grasped his arming sword's blade and bashed his foe's helmet, finishing her with his dagger. Now their forces pushed against the still rushing wave, their hits finding some targets and glancing off others. At last Aerin heard a shock bolt pierce the snowy night sky, lighting what came ahead. He turned to see the Dawnguard woman carried a lightning staff, the Redguard housecarl leading some of Ulfric Stormcloak's men to join them. Yet this small comfort was not enough for what he would see ahead.

"By the gods," he swore.

The horde filled every inch from here to the lakeshore, he saw. Ingjard's face twisted at the sight, while Rayya's breathing grew deeper. The lightning bolt, however, gave him an idea.

"Uthgerd," he called out to the Unbroken warrior beside him.

"Aye?"

36. *Aerin*

“Rush to the manor house and check the basement with the mages.”

Her eyes lit, knowing what Aerin needed. “Aye, will do.”

“Fall back on my watch!” Rayya barked to the defenders. They stepped back from the fighting and formed a shield wall, the bandit wave filling in the gaps to resume their pounding.

“Retreat!” Aerin cried. And so they fell back step by step to the manor house, the snowstorm brewing above them.

Mjoll

Mercenary work had never suited her. She had always liked going on her own terms. Now, that meant defending her friend's property. His oath to the local Jarl mattered none. He would bring Skyrim a new peace, a new richness.

Her glass blade squeezed through an orc's armor, goring his rib cage. She held her sword downward in parry, spinning it above to land by a bandit's shoulder. Her foe's screams started loud, getting quiet as his last breath left him. She parried a spear and took an ox stance to stab the one who tried stabbing her.

The Pinewatch cabin stood amid bandit arrows and fireballs raining on the shieldwall. Here their bulwark stopped the flood of bandits charging in, bodies piling up into the spiked trench below. Wave after wave crashed into their line, some making it across the trench. Meeting spears and swords from all sides. Stabbed and slashed, thrown into the trench.

"For Skyrim!" she shouted. "For Junius!"

Lightning bolts pierced over the trenches, ice storms joining afterwards. The Lioness roared, signed for troops to rally by her. In a flash they charged for a plank laid over the trenches, fighting through the bandits marching across. Mjoll parried a spear and she slashed through her foe's neck. She feinted left and she thrust right into a redguard spellsword. She hit a nord's buckler and she pierced straight through his mail. The troops by her pushed back the tide with their shields, spears going through some, their foes' corpses joining others into the trenches.

Then a whistling sound aired, and the plank snapped apart. Mjoll

37. *Mjoll*

hit her head on the soil, her vision blurring. As she came to her senses, piles of hay and grass fell upon her. Her eyes widened, and she leaped out of the other bodies and troops. A fireball lit behind her, troops screaming and shouting as they burned and choked under the weight of burning hay. Some lucky troops shielded themselves as they joined Mjoll in climbing out of the trenches.

As they did so ballista bolts shot into the shieldwalls, many Stormcloaks close to breaking. Cries for Mjoll's safety aired, then were answered when she threw a spear to a rushing Redguard bandit.

"Now ain't this a surprise," the bandit scowled as she caught the spear. She wore dwarven plate and wielded a hammer. "You Drag-onborn's dogs have so much fight in you."

"How else could we have killed so many like you?" the Lioness shouted back.

"Like me? Dear, you've never seen any like me."

Explosions rocked the defending line as Mjoll covered her ears and eyes from the rushing smoke and gases. The bandits surged forward again, the trench line now buckling and breaking under this last wave. Mjoll rallied her troops backwards, the manor house now their only safety.

Erik the Slayer had shut close the Pinewatch cabin, a few bandits kicking and hacking at its door. The rest kept surging, retreating defenders stopping only to throw a spear or stone to bide even a little time. They dashed into the inner Manor walls, watchmen locking close the doors now facing a battering ram.

Some Stormcloaks readied boiling water, only to feel its pain after a javelin tipped it over. Mjoll slumped by the manor house itself, catching her breath from the fight and retreat. Yet the night would grant her no rest, for she heard her Aerin calling a retreat.

“Aerin? Gods, what happened?”

She trudged through the manor grounds only to face an ever retreating shieldwall. A few dragons crashed and shouted fire and frost to the horde. Wards and magics kept their losses low. Even the main gate could hold for only so long. Mjoll felt her chest tighten, grasping for something to lean on. Aerin caught her before she could collapse.

“My dear, you alright?”

“Is the night lost, Aerin? Will the Dragonborn lose his stading?”

He hugged her tight as the night sky shone. Mjoll thought that Sovn-garde had come to claim her. She reached out to the rushing brightness, only for blood to greet her face.

“That’s a no, Mjoll.”

Mages atop the manor house loosed flare after flare of pure magicka, consuming potion after potion to keep it up. Sharp noises echoed through the night sky, followed by screams and wails.

“We found Junius’s stash of magicka potions,” Uthgerd said as she walked to the embracing couple. Blood and body parts would fall around them, the bloody mess somewhat comforting as the bandits by Ilinalta receded. The estate facing Lake Ilinalta was strewn with bandits and bandit bodies and bandit blood littered all over. Even then, those by the main gate kept their assault. The ram kept its motions as some troops tried in vain to stop them.

At last, a quiet aired, only to be broken as a loud crackle blew through the manor, and wood splinters flew around the resting party. The Redguard bandit stood in front by the gatehouse, her party’s eyes all bloodshot.

“Your tricks may have bought you time, scared off that Falkreath crow,” she said. “But this ends now. Vengeance for our fallen, and your bodies hung and gored. We shall see to those ends now.”

37. *Mjoll*

The bandit woman charged, her party following, the bandit horde cheering on. Mjoll bore Grimsever, her glass sword, to meet the hammer ready to smite her, her friends, her liege's estate. She caught the overhead swing with a parry and she swung from her right yet her foe caught it with the handle and thrust forward. Mjoll parried the thrust yet felt the handle crash into her helmet. She steadied herself, and she opened with a thrust caught and parried, only to swing right and slash across. The move hit, yet bounced off the armor. She cursed her training, and she swung from the left. Her foe caught her and readied a swing, yet Mjoll was faster and thrust straight into the plate's elbow joint. Now the bandit clutched her elbow, dropping her hammer.

The bandit retinue had been fighting off the other troops, and they all lost heart when their leader dropped her weapon. They rallied to her, yet lost cohesion in doing so, and were cut down one by one. The bandit horde frenzied, rushed forward again, yet Mjoll and her troops faced them and fought them. At last, shouts and screams rang from behind the bandit mass. Mjoll heard the Slayer barking orders and crying in glee as the remaining defenders caught the bandits from both sides. Many had started dropping their weapons, fleeing to an opening within the manor grounds. Troops that came from the manor house caught them and cut them down.

Sunrise saw the bandit Nubia in binds, locked away in the manor house's basement. Mjoll led a search party and found both Marcurio and Ingjard, bad wounds yet still breathing. Bandit bodies and corpses littered the estate, and their rot gave a bad smell for weeks to come.

Claudia

Tir-das, 3 Morning Star

Snowfall came rarer these days, Claudia noticed. The New Year had just come in. No one had celebrated outdoors, too much fear of an attack. Only drinks and better rations.

“We need boots here, quaestor.”

“Aye, Centurion.”

A demotion, for ordering a civilian’s execution almost four years ago. And another, for letting Ulfric Stormcloak escape. Letting an entire rebel company escape. Stuck behind a desk, pushing her quill, doing errands.

And now that civilian had grown to be the biggest threat to the Empire anyone has known.

No one would believe her. She always knew that something was off about him. A new face in Darkwater Crossing, suddenly approaching the Imperial camp. Tribune Hadvar had taken him away from the chopping block, had shamed her in front of her men. Then that dragon had come and ruined her life. That man had ruined her life.

“Quaestor, bring these supplies to the barracks.”

“Aye, Centurion.”

She made the dash across Helgen’s newly paved streets. They had finished in time for the rebels’ attack on Whiterun. Construction had started when the dragons had suddenly grown quiet. No word on rebel movements for three years, only skirmishes here and there. Everyone had known that the ceasefire would last for only so long. The rebels had resented Dawnstar’s loss on the bargaining table. The Legion had

hated their required reparations to noble Stormcloak families.

Then she had thrown a javelin to a Stormcloak idling by the border with RIFTEN.

Yet that had been no battle, only a skirmish. No one could get into RIFTEN. No one could get into Windhelm either, for the rebels had blocked all passes from Dawnstar. A muddy peace for three years.

Then the rebels had ambushed them in the Pale.

She remembered wishing for the day she marched from Helgen into Whiterun, defeating the rebels. Yet she had fought only a raid into RIFTEN, making it as far as some old tomb before being pushed back by cavalry bearing a wreathed red diamond.

She had remained in Helgen ever since, pushing her quill, running errands. No one had done anything about that cavalry. Some cult that supported that man, they had said. No concern, they had said.

“Have these documents ready by tomorrow noon, quaestor.”

“Aye, Centurion.”

She had heard of a battle to the West. Only one this winter. That man’s estate besieged by a large army of mercenaries. Cut down to the last man, their bodies floating by Lake Ilinalta. Then the rebels had abandoned Ilinalta Tower. A retreat back to Riverwood, she had heard. The patrols sent to survey the tower had found the bodies floating towards Whiterun. Burnt, gored, hacked, beheaded, crushed. Mercenaries who would not spend their pay.

Provincial dolts without legionary training, she thought. Nothing could replace the legion she looked up to, the legion she worked in, the legion which had given her life meaning. No rebels, no dragons, no man like him.

“Get these orders to Ilinalta Tower, quaestor.”

“Aye, praefect.”

She jumped on a courser and she coursed the road north. A few hours through snow-topped forests, birds whistling, wolves howling. The odd hunter catching prey.

Then she came to the tower.

“I have new orders from the praefect,” she said.

A man in light iron scale took the folded note. “Boys back in Helgen finally giving us entertainment.”

“Watch your tongue. The praefect deserves respect.”

“No quaestor can tell another praefect what to do.”

Her face froze. “My apologies, praefect.”

His eyes moved left to right, reading his orders.

“May I ask what it says, sire?”

“Hold tight for another month. Some talk of moving troops from the border with the Rift.”

“I will be off.”

“Not yet.” The Poenitus praefect signed for Claudia to stop. “Tell the praefect there that we in the Poenitus suspect that the rebels plan to flank Falkreath through the Rift pass.”

“P-Poenitus?”

“Poenitus Oculatus, lass. Imperial spies.”

“R-right.”

“They need more troops there, not fewer. Put up checkpoints every inch of the pass.”

“Yes, sire.”

Another few hours back to Helgen. The praefect took her words with

38. *Claudia*

a flat face.

“Rebels flanking us by the Rift? How in Oblivion can they think that they can go through—oh no.”

“Sire?”

“Write a letter to General Tullius requesting more men. I don’t care if we stick a hundred men every inch in that pass. We need to stop the rebel attack. And make sure to ask for Tribune Hadvar to lead here. Stendarr knows that I have no guts to stop whatever will come.”

Quill and ink by her side, the letter finished in half an hour. A courier sped north, off somewhere Claudia didn’t bother to find out. She would be back to her routine again, thanks to that man.

Part III.

The Campaign

Hjalti was a shrewd tactician, and his small band of Colovian troops and Nord berserkers broke the Reachman line, forcing them back beyond the gates of Old Hrol'dan. A siege seemed impossible, as Hjalti could expect no reinforcements from Falkreath. . . At dawn, Hjalti went up to the gates. . . He shouted down the walls of Old Hrol'dan, and his men poured in. After their victory, the Nords called Hjalti Talos, or Stormcrown.

The Arcturian Heresy, Zurin Arctus—The Underking, Ysmir King-maker

Junius

Lore-das, 14 Morning Star

“Any word from the Lakeview? We could use some scouting before we link up with our inserted men.”

Vilkas spat out his gargled mead. “No messages so far. Just a little bandit raid. Think we should deal with the barrier ahead first before we head elsewhere.”

“Right you are.”

The Rift’s bare forests started giving way to rising mountains, snow forever topping them. They had left Ivarstead at dawn, columns marching to cross the border crossing into Falkreath. They would face loyalist resistance on the way, no doubt. The first battle since the winter ended.

“When we get to the Alchemist’s shack, ready some men to scale the wall,” Junius ordered. “Try to count how many Imperials there are on the other side.”

“You think they’ve formed up there?” Lydia asked.

“I know it. The dragon blood lets me know.”

“Very well.”

Thousands of men and women who had spent the winter training, drilling, marching. What ragtag warriors had mustered for Whiterun now presented a real threat for any force that would face them. Troops in lamellar and mail, armed with spears in front, axes behind, crossbows and bows and cannons beside. Dunmer mages in mixed order. Giants slogging behind, to fight once Junius knew the right moment to send them. The Dragonborn himself, his friends and allies gathered

through his three years of travels joining him. Friends far and few, yet forever faithful.

“My thane, we’re ready to deploy ahead,” a bald man in steel lamellar said, riding beside Junius. He had candlelight hovering over him, and warmth emanated from his coat.

“Not yet, Valdimar. Start the assault only once we get there.”

“Of course.”

The march went for hours without end. Magecraft and sorcery kept them going forward without end. Through snow and ice which covered the pass without end. To end this season which many thought to be without end.

“Get ready, you outlanders,” a chitin-covered dunmer barked. “Today, we show those faithless dogs what for!”

Cheers and chants, loud and willing. All accorded to their lockstep walk.

“Junius, you sly Colovian.” Galmar said, galloping to him. “You don’t think we should have ferried the men across Ilinalta? Gone across Riverwood?”

“Snows are melting. Can’t ford any rivers right now. Only this pass can do.”

“I know, you humorless bastard. Better the ice here than the mud anywhere else.”

“His Majesty is alright in Whiterun?”

“He finds it too comfortable for his liking there. Vignar and family have been gracious hosts. So Ulfric obviously misses Windhelm’s chills.”

“He might have preferred joining us for our little walk.”

Galmar chuckled. “Now you get it. A king needs his seat, though,

and he knows that the Old Holds are in good hands.”

“How does Jorleif find managing Eastmarch?”

“Nothing ever happens that gold or words can’t fix.” Galmar coughed, the air still dry from winter past. “Only a giant that needs killing or bandits needing spanking.”

“Very well. We should get to the border in a short while.”

“Out of all Imperials you Colovians might just be the worst. Nordic enough yet too cold.”

“It’s a harsh life down in the estates. No matter, after Falkreath we might just get into Bruma, too.”

“Don’t push it too hard. Cyrodiil has been anxious as it is, especially after your little adventure with the Church of St Martin and the Bruma guards.”

“We can expect troops to march up the Pale Pass. Better to be ready and do a quick raid than sit in Falkreath doing nothing.”

“Leave that for after we take the crossing, Dragonborn.”

“Right you are.”

The sun rose higher and stayed above. A light flurry. Some troops coughed. Some shivered. Some gasped. All kept their long march for their next prize.

Mountains rose larger and stayed the troops below from further weather. A light breeze. Junius shook his head, breathed out, faced his coming battle. He kept his mind to only what would come ahead.

At last they came upon a shack. A robed woman peeked her head out, promptly shut her door.

Junius rode to the columns’ head and he yelled a powerful cry. His Voice elated his men and they cheered for their leader of the Dragonblood.

“The Thalmor claim that our god Shor fooled us—fooled you! They claim Shor a false god!”

A large yell, many as one, echoing through the mountain pass. Junius heard footsteps scurrying further ahead. Their first battle in months.

“They force us—force you—to pay taxes so we can worship Ysmir Talos!”

Another round of yelling.

“The Empire thinks that it can muddy His legacy through blasphemy and disgrace! It thinks that it can profit of Him, while banning the dead god whom He worshipped!”

A barrage of oaths.

“Ysmir smite them!”

“Kyne waste them!”

“Mara exile them!”

“Stuhn keep their ransoms high!”

“Tsun defeat them!”

“Jhunal burn them!”

Junius smirked. “Now you will understand why our Father Shor willed our existence! That we may become the image of the one whole Godhead, bearing nothing from Creation in ourselves but the knowledge that all is illusion, so that we may consort with the Godhead and become gods, receiving from the Godhead our existence as gods.”

“Long live our Father Shor!”

“Slay the elves!”

“Death to the Thalmor!”

“Death to the Aedric denegrations!”

“The syllable of royalty greet us!”

“For the Psijic Endeavor!”

The twang of bowstrings some distance west. They know that we come, Junius thought. And so they will know who deserves the throne.

“And so we mend Skyrim’s wounds by fire and blade, and free her from impurity and evil. Now, berserkers, charge the border wall’s gate!”

“Skyrim belongs to the Nords!”

Junius galloped aside, joining his retinue. A mass of bear-hooded troops bearing war axes and longaxes and longswords and greatswords rushed forward, bearing a large ram with them.

“Archers and crossbowmen, loose just above the wall!”

Yells complying, volley and shot after volley and shot. Junius could hear their foes scream far away.

“Leaders, off to your units,” Junius said to his retinue. “I’ll join in the battle’s thickest.”

“Aye,” they answered. And so the battle began.

Light infantry carried ladders to the wall. Dunmer mages followed them, ready to shower flame and shock.

“Haven’t seen any of this in Valenwood,” Junius could hear Faendal say in the charge. Serves that Sven right, he thought. But no matter. It was time for battle and carnage.

Junius trotted to a fenced hillside, probably the local alchemist’s doing. Vilkas and Farkas each let out a shout, and they led another column of berserkers forward. Those by the gate had already broken it halfway. Yet Junius smelled something strange. Sulphury.

“Get a dunmer to freeze whatever’s on the opposite side of the gate,” he told Brelyna.

39. *Junius*

“I’ll do it myself, love.”

“Go.”

The legion and their tricks, Junius thought. Nothing new to him, yet bitter all the same.

“Galmar,” Junius called. “Blow this horn when I say so.”

Ivory with ancient gilding. Galmar twisted his head, then chuckled.

“I’m the one taking orders now, it seems.”

“Just a little notice to our big friends over there.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Some crossbowmen and mages on the wall had begun loosing shot after shot. Whoever was behind the wall didn’t budge, it seemed.

“Do you think they have cannons?” Valdimar asked.

“I smell sulphur in the gate. Probably do.”

“We’ll freeze them”

“So you will, Valdimar. I trust your better judgements.”

The gate fell, and the Dragonborn’s dunmeri wife let out a blizzard. Screams, sound of fire extinguished. Yet the obstacle remained, and Junius knew what to do.

He galloped to the vanguard’s head and he alighted to his troops’ cheers. Walking to the pile of gunpowder, he began speaking.

“You legionaries, you loyalists. Ever cowering behind your shields, your walls, you and your damn lists and records. Have you forgotten how Tiber Septim founded your Empire? Not with lists or shields or cowering.” A smirk. “With the power of the Voice, his or his friends’.”

Silence, then fury. FUS ROH DAH. The barrels flew far away. Junius saw shocked and frozen faces from his place. YOL TUUR SHUL. The loudest noise which anyone in the battle heard. Loyalist guts and body

parts flying through the air. STRUN BAH QO. The first blizzard of the year aimed for their foes. OD AH VIING. His kin, hunting for prey.

From the clouds burst two dozen dragons, riders in Akaviri armor, bearing Akaviri arms. They swooped down and they let out bursts and blasts of flame and frost, loyalist screams curdling even the rebels' blood. But not Junius.

"Forward, and we shall take Falkreath by the month's end!"

"For Skyrim!"

"Death to the Empire!"

"Ysmir gives us strength!"

The berserkers charged through the gate and they hacked and swung at straggling loyalists, those not already ashes or pulp. Junius smirked and looked back to Galmar. He mimed blowing a horn, and Galmar nodded. The sound echoed through the valley and the giants roared and they rushed forward. Leaping over the wall, they went forward to lead the brawl against entrenched and barricaded loyalists.

The Dragonborn twirled his axe and spun it in the air. "Rally to me," he cried. He readied a fireball in his left hand and he led the rest of his host forward with the berserkers and he loosed flame onto a shieldwall. He let out his Voice between the giants, across a turn. FUS ROH DAH. Splinters and snow and body parts flying ahead to rain on loyalists cowering and shrieking. And the giants reached their mark.

"Keep your positions! For the Ruby Throne!" someone shouted across the field. Yet their fury went to vain for the giants turned their shielded squads to splinters and guts. One legionary archer loosed for a knee. The giant roared and he threw his axe straight for his foe.

"Between them, charge!" Junius barked. And his host fell into the fray.

The Dragonborn met a legionary captain whose helmet he bashed,

whose shoulder his axe bit into. His left hand loosed a combusting flame into a Falkreath militiaman thrusting a spear. His axe went to a legionary who blocked, then faced lightning through his eyes and nose and mouth. Now Junius loosed the Voice to a forming shieldwall and he charged through the gap with his host and they made short work of those on the sides, enveloped among charging rebels and giants and valley walls. Junius voiced flame to the shieldwall behind and he flung more fireballs and he sparked chain lightning to the enveloped loyalists, his host hacking away at the rest. No loyalist archers stayed for the rebels had shown their might and loyalist archers wanted no cruel death in snowy graves. Junius parried an attacking axeman and he bahsed the flat of his axe on his foe and he fainted right to hit his foe's right, axe splitting mail, blood seeping. His foe kneeled, face wincing, and Junius removed the poor man's helmet. His palm embraced the man's scalp, and Junius let sparks fly.

"Up the pass, onward to Falkreath!" Lydia cried a distance behind.

"For the Dragonborn and King Ulfric!" Galmar followed.

Their foes had fled to regroup and the army climbed the pass and charged into another Imperial barricade. Archers and battlemages loosing at them, dunmer wards protecting their vanguard. Crossbows shot back, hitting piles of dirt poured into bundles of wood protecting their main defenses. Junius loosed his voice and all mages loosed shock and flame onto those cowering behind. Their foe's battlemages warded most. Those unlucky erupted straight into vapor of blood and flesh.

"Careful for their trenches!" Junius ordered "Advance slowly!"

Imperial battlemages loosed chains onto the centurion's helmet seen above the rebel swarm. Crossbowmen shot them first. Then the dragons returned.

"All hail Ysmir and his dragons!" someone shouted.

“All hail Shor and his love of men!” someone replied.

Chants and roars as they advanced through the pass slopes, muddy and dug up from melted snow and fatigued engineers. The dragons swooped across the loyalist formation, swallowed some troops, and flew back up lest they fall to unworthy creatures. The rebel host had met their mark after another disruption, shieldwall touching loosened lines, blades loyal to Skyrim thrust and hacked and swung into wavering foes. At last the loyalists had formed up behind, yet their move made their friends ahead cower and rout, demanding entrance. Junius smirked and joined the fighting, his axe felling foes left and right. No one ahead of the loyalist shield wall survived that day.

Then two shieldwalls met now, each side’s men daring the other’s to folly. An imperial battlemage palatine barked orders from behind. Fireballs and lightning loosed at any dragon in sight. Arrows dropping behind the rebel formation. Imperial veterans pushing the rebels back to the trenches. Yet Junius knew how to make him suffer.

A dart borned from magicka, flying through the palatine’s helmet, into his cheek. His wound now gushing out blood unstoppable, festering his least concern. The loyalist wall buckled, then wavered, then finally routed as their palatine was carried off to the next barricade. Junius cried, and the rebels charged ahead to strike.

The race to Haemar’s Shame found bodies dropping every inch. Rebel mages loosing fireballs. Berserkers rushing to catch prey. Cross-bowmen and archers hunting running game. Troops hitting limbs, then hearts. The Dragonborn showing dominance over men.

It passed that they approached the next barricade. Junius found dripping icicles, and he casted levitation and he entered the hidden cavern passage, leading to a shrine of Clavicus Vile. His host would assault the barricade and rush inside. He would fight from behind.

He crouched and he observed the main shrine area. No more worship

to daedra, the area cleared and stacked with officers' equipment. A legate checking files. An orderly making up beds. Two staff bringing meals. Four darts, dropping them like flies. Junius took the legate's sword and sliced off his head.

Now he passed tunnels, taking out some guards. He entered the main chamber, sighting men setting up barricades. He threw the head among them. They flinched, and they found Junius. A charge, a flurry of parries and strikes, and the chamber had emptied. He took back the head by its hair and climbed up the stairs.

Through a twisting passage, faint torchlight giving sight. Then the guard passage, where everyone had readied for a fight. Junius let the head roll among those waiting. Someone saw it and flinched.

"The legatus? How?"

Others saw the head and realized who had owned it.

"Gods damn it, men, some of you find who did this!"

Some volunteers rushed ahead. They tripped on a rope, and Junius stabbed them with the legate's sword. He could hear the officer demanding that someone investigate their tumbling noises, and Junius hid again. Two militiamen, shocked at the sight, fallen from magicka darts. Junius now heard labored breathing ahead.

"Gods damn you whoever you are, come out here and fight us!"

Sound of a ram hitting a gate. Junius smirked.

"Damn it, 30 of you watch out for that fiend. The rest, get to the gate and fight for our lives!"

Screams and roars filled the next half hour, rebel arms rushing inside. At last Junius stepped out and voiced flame at those standing watch. Parry against sword, hit into neck, shock against face, headbutt into chest, his moves repeating till the Stormcloaks filled the chamber themselves.

A man tied the legate's head to a pole that some dunmer had set up outside. Some men took turns throwing axes and javelins at it. At last, they asked Junius to try. He threw a throwing axe, splitting the head top to bottom. Those present cheered as the legate's brain poured down to the snow.

Illia

More death did she see than when she had killed her mother with the Dragonborn's help. She had dabbled into Necromancy, had helped the Dragonborn root out bandits, had fought man and mer and beast and creature. Yet no battle. Her first today had shocked her. No other feeling or thought, only shock.

She kept riding forward till Lake Ilinalta appeared by the horizon. Her dragon flew down, and she alighted by the manor house's porch.

Not much damage left from the raid a month ago. Marcurio had informed the Blades what had happened. A bandit army, five thousand strong. Junius's four hundred men holding fast. A few dragons dead, many more men with them. The whole bandit army, too.

"Illia!" a lamellar-covered blonde called to her. "News from the front?"

"We've broken through, Uthgerd."

"So it begins."

A bell rang, drawing out those within the manor. They saw a shadow below, its winged source flying above spouting fire. They all broke into cheers and applause.

"Long live the Dragonborn!"

"Long live King Ulfric!"

"Death to the Empire!"

The Blade mage walked around the manor, observed it. Some plants still shone dark red from blood. She had read Marcurio's report. The defenders had taken out a large horde using magic volley. And there she saw what happened after. Some bits of flesh stenching in rot, some

blood caked on wall and shrub, the odd tooth or jawbone or foot. They here had burned the corpses littered inside and around the manor facing Lake Ilinalta. Yet they had spared much of the dead a proper burial.

They could make for a good army, she thought. Then she stopped herself, held her mouth. She shook her head, shook off her thoughts. She would never trod down that path again.

“Does the smell bother you here?” she asked a Redguard wielding dual scimitars. They were standing on the battlement facing the lake.

“It did for the day after,” she answered. “Marcurio and Ingjard were out cold till sundown. Stench must have helped wake them up.”

Ilia shivered. Rayya yawned, twisted her face a bit when some wind carried a rotting stench.

“Many bandits were still alive for the following days. We heard a few screaming when we doused and burned them.”

A sigh. “The ashes?”

“Some villagers and farmers took them while we weren’t looking. Used it for fertilizer.”

Some men in the distance waved over to them, a large ditch by their shovels. Two Stormcloaks dumped in bloated flesh, jagged bones, some hair, a few tendons and muscles. Illia sighed. Her hand turned blue, and she casted something their way.

“We could at least not smell the stench.”

Ingjard and Marcurio were drilling troops by the gate. Some formations, some charging, some defending, some assaulting. They wouldn’t need to use their training for a while. Not with Helgen in the army’s way.

The Blade waved over to Faendal and Uthgerd, who joined her out-

side the manor. The estate at large had no permanent damage, yet burn marks abounded on tree and stone. The Pinewatch cabin itself was blackened with soot and ashes. The Slayer stood in front of it, practicing forms with his longsword.

“Things alright here?” Illia asked.

“They are. Been uneventful since the raid.”

“That was more than a raid, don’t you think?”

“Aye,” he said, laughing. “I fought in a sally in Whiterun before the Wind District fell. Furious, but not like this.”

“Must have been an experience.”

“How was the offensive?”

“Went well. A little too well.”

Erik laughed. “I guess Helgen’s no match for us.”

“Or Falkreath,” Faendal said. “Five thousand against four hundred. What odds.”

“Aye,” Uthgerd said. “We’ll win this war and see a free Skyrim.”

“And what of Junius?” Erik asked.

“On the thro—”

“Not too loud,” Illia said, hushing him.

They went on through the road. A line on the ground looked newly filled, and a faint stench kept in the air. A chill passed Illia’s spine, and they moved on.

Death abounded here, she thought. As it did in the pass earlier that day. She remembered what she had done. Rode her dragon, crashed into loyalist masses, tore through flesh and bone. She had done the same before, under her mother’s watch. With a scalpel and saw, with flame magic, not her beast. She had followed death, and now death

followed her in this war.

At last they came to the Pinewatch bridge, or what was left of it. A couple of Redguards stood watch, waving to the party as they neared. One of them wore a turban, the other a helmet. They carried an odd sight, a wooden piece fixed to a steel barrel.

“What do you have?”

“My lady, it’s a musket. Many of them back in Hammerfell.”

“You’re mercenaries?”

“Aye, under contract to guard this place after that mess last month.” One of the mercenaries yawned. “That Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak thought it a good idea to have some more men.”

“Can I see how that weapon works?”

They nodded, the helmeted one holding out his piece. “All the action works in this metal tube, the barrel. Works like a small cannon, only it has this wooden stock for your shoulder.”

“What for?”

“Try for yourself.”

She held the musket and stood it on a stick. She aimed for a piece of fruit, growing on a tree. The other mercenary fiddled with what looked like a steel wheel with teeth.

“Just pull the trigger when you want to.”

Illia did so, and loud thunder cackled through the estate. The fruit exploded into pieces now sticking on the ground. A dull pain throbbed through her shoulder, the blast pushing the weapon backwards. The two mercenaries started clapping.

“My pa used something like this to fight the Dominon,” he said. “We’re glad to help Skyrim with the same.”

Illia smiled, yet her face grew pale. She could imagine what would happen if a face stood before her instead of a fruit. She dared not do so, and carried on her inspection.

A few trees burnt, an outpost burnt, some more bodies strewn and unburied. No more sights in the estate, and no signs of loyalist presence. She sighed as she entered the manor house, sundown now nearing. The bedroom was locked shut, reserved only for the Dragonborn and his family. The armory had arms and armor scattered in piles next to shelves and armor stands. Bedrolls and blankets littered the anteroom and the hall and the second floor and the storage room, a second barracks for Junius's own men away from the Pinewatch. His companions slept in the basement, and so Illia climbed down there.

The basement reached further than the manor house above ground. Forges, bedrooms, practice rooms. An altar to Shor, and Talos. She pressed a hidden button, and she entered the room. Her main mission was there, a woman bound in chains, black cloth blinding her, earplugs deafening her.

"Damn bastards!" she screamed. "I don't care how much I've been screaming. I'll scream some more just to make you get me outta here!"

For her troubles, a smack. Illia felt nothing, drawing her knife. She never used it on the dead anymore. Only on the living.

"My remaining men will come and gut you all. My family. My friends. Your doom! You here me?"

Another smack, and Illia got to work.

Helvard

Fre-das, 20 Morning Star

He woke to two hunters looking from above. Smell of smoked meat in the air, winter's cold not as cold as his last waking moment. Sunlight reaching in from above pine trees. He began standing yet stopped in pain.

"Take it easy, you had a bad gash across your chest."

His wounds froze his movement, his pain blurred his memory.

"Where am I? What date is it?"

"We saw you collapsed by Peak's Shade Tower. We brought you over to our cabin by North Keep."

"North Keep?" He held his head, the throbbing never ceasing. "By the gods, how long have I been here?"

"More than a month. You've been drifting in and out of your torpor."

"What was Peak's Shade Tower like when you found me?"

"Ruined, as always. We saw fire and smoke far off though."

"Fire and smoke—." His head throbbed as memories flooded back to him. He groaned.

"Hey, hey, take it easy. We'll have food and drink for you in a while."

The boar's hide was burnt somewhat, but warm, soft flesh greeted Helvard as he bit into his meal. He had been out for a month, living only on water and cheap potions. His last sight was that Dragonborn's fiends teaming up on him. An arrow had come for his chest, the armor hit so hard that it had wounded him after deflection. The housecarl sighed through his teeth. He wondered whether Falkreath stood

strong through the winter's end. Whatever had happened to Helgen. Whether the war still wore on.

"What word you of the war?"

"The war?" The hunters shrugged. "No clue," one said.

"Last we heard, there were a few skirmishes by RIFTEN."

"RIFTEN," Helvard repeated.

"Not many bandits on the road we had to fight, too."

Helvard's eyes lit up. He now remembered. "I need to get back to Falkreath. Here." He took out a few gold septims. "Thank you for your service this past month."

He rode beside the hunters with a donkey, his companions carting meat and hides for sale. Their ride took the night, the roads quiet and clear. Bandits were a menace for foreigners only before the war. Yet many had grown desperate, and had used their vigor to menace than build. At least Falkreath was clear of them for now.

"When did you notice that the roads got clearer?" he asked his party.

"Around a month ago."

"Been little trouble to trade and hunt recently."

"Aye. Used to have to cut off a nose or arm just to work peacefully. But now it's been smooth hunting."

"I see," Helvard answered.

The pines got denser as they travelled upland, winter's last remnants still present here and there. A few piles of snow, puddles around them. The odd beast burrowing in and out of soil. An owl calling out time to time. Night time had never been more quiet in Falkreath, where bandits had stalked convoys and caravans unlucky to be outside a settlement after sundown, their forts and hideouts now empty shells.

At last town guardsmen halted them by the gates. Helvard threw off his hood and showed his face. The guards gasped, and let them inside.

“Nice seeing you back here, housecarl,” one said. The hunters all turned to him, their faces pale.

“Aye,” he turned to them. “The hold thanks you for your service.”

He handed the donkey’s reins to them, nodded, and went with the guardsmen. He found his home, still standing, still loyal to the Empire.

Morning broke through his window, hitting his first good bed in a month. He took a spell tome, heated water, and washed himself with cinder ashes mixed with venison fat. Now he made for the keep, where his Jarl bid him welcome.

“My, it’s about time you returned,” he said. “You’re not getting payment for your past month absent.”

“Aye,” the housecarl said. Sidgeir yawned.

“Now get back to managing the guards and militia. We’ve word that the rebels had stormed in from Riften.”

“What?”

“Have your ears failed in your vacation? The rebels marched in a week ago, and are making for Helgen as we speak. In fact, they might have already reached there.”

“By the gods, it wasn’t just a skirmish?”

“I don’t care for your military terms, they’re your field. Bruma’s forces had just marched in here a day after the invasion. Go talk to them.”

Helvard sighed, and he made for the city’s eastern outskirts. True enough, Bruma’s eagle crest flew proudly over a mass of tents and propped up stalls, mailed and quilted guardsmen and knights mixed with lamellar and scale bearing legionaries. Quaint sights and sounds

41. *Helvard*

from their visitors, some soldiers taking turns hacking at quarries for souvenir stones, others testing peers in skill of arms, stores and merchants selling Nordic food and drink to their Colovian customers from down south. The mass looked large, but the housecarl could not help thinking it was rather small.

“Make way!” some troops shouted as a man in simple brigandine marched forward. Long hair, a circlet, and an Akaviri longsword like what the Dragonborn’s servants used. This was the man, Helvard thought.

“Viscount Carvain!” he called out. “I’m Jarl Sidgeir’s housecarl.”

“House carl?” he asked. “Like a house cat?”

Those around him laughed.

“Nay, I’m his retainer.”

“Ah, you’re the one who’s supposed to help me.”

Helvard looked around. He saw many soldiers, but not an army. “How many men do you have with you.”

“Five hundred.”

“Five hundred?” Helvard almost choked on his spit. “We need much more if we’re to stop the rebels from reaching here.”

“These were all the men that I could afford as my personal retainers. County Bruma itself has forces standing watch over the Pale Pass with legionaries.”

“Even so, we still need to coordinate with them to fight the rebels.”

“Relax, house cat, have an Akaviri trinket on me.”

The Viscount threw him something, which the housecarl found was a pair of metal sticks.

“They’re chopsticks. Good for eating food that lumps together, or you

can bite off easily.”

Helvard sighed, said a quick thanks, and wandered through the camp. The legionaries looked more like young rascals than veterans or servicemen. The knights looked more like thugs and thieves. The other soldiers were busier enjoying the place than preparing for battle. He gave up thinking, and went to a stall selling Wasabi laced Colovian rice mixed with sugar and salt. He ordered some with raw salmon, and dug in by a bench. Tourists had come, not soldiers.

He went home, threw down his choptsticks with his spoons and forks, and he sighed. “Smite my luck, Stuhn,” he said. He wondered whether Bruma’s reinforcements would come and aid them. Whether the Viscount actually wanted to help. Whether the Pale Pass even was still loyal, and not littered with Stormcloak scouts. Falkreath would face its worst test yet, he thought.

Hadvar

Mid-das, 17 Morning Star

“Ready yourselves. No man should get past our barricade.”

Trenches, stakes, palisades, dug, planted, set up. The rebels had finally broken through, and their leader had shown no mercy to those defending. Neither will we, Hadvar thought. When they come.

“Engineers, break the road. If we lose, at least the rebels would have had a bad day getting here.”

Some holes drilled, then shadow legion mages approaching. Blasts and flying dirt, only the first of disturbances.

“Helgen shall be secured, Tribune,” his quartermaster said.

“We shall see, Orthus.”

“Have no worries, both of you.” The first spear Centurion let out a yawn. “Helgen will be a death trap for the rebels.”

“Remember, Metilius. We go with your avalanche idea only if the rebels get to the keep.”

“The Dragonborn should have died there, that day.”

“Well he didn’t. That is the gods’ will.”

“You don’t think we can get Goldbrand though? Pray to Boethiah just in case?”

“Don’t believe the rumors. The Emperor would never have used a tainted sword in battle.”

“And besides, Centurion,” Orthus said. “The daedric prince would just give us over to the dark elves.”

“Terrible management by the Elder Council, I do say,” Metilius said. “Morrowind now with the rebels! After all the charity the Jarls here gave them, they’d help break the province in two.”

Hadvar grimaced. “No need to bring up events two centuries past. Morrowind has chosen its fate, and will be our next target after cleaning up the rebels’ mess.”

“To think Ulfric would ally with daedra worshippers,” the Centurion said. “Really shows what he’s in it for.”

“So we know,” the Tribune said. “But all’s well. Helgen will be secured, if you two are correct.”

“A death trap,” Orthus said. “For them, hopefully.”

“Censors would have your head back in Cyrodiil,” Metilius said.

“Can’t blame them. Rebels moving up fast, last I heard.”

Metilius raised an eye. “You know about this, Hadvar?”

“Rebels have linked up with some camps that house skrimishers.”

“Oh, that. More rebels to catch, that’s all.”

The day’s work halted for the troops needed a moment’s rest. Winter had almost receded and they could feel the spring sun bearing overhead. Hadvar took rest under a cottage’s shade. He viewed what had finished so far. Trenches surrounding Helgen, spikes in them. Palisades with platforms for shooting. Rows of stakes in front, keeping the rebels reaches away. Then they would form shield walls if anyone broke through. Behind the walls, ballistae to hit dragons and any other flying contraptions. Helgen had become a rundown fort when they had captured Ulfric. Not anymore. General Tullius had sent two legions to defend it from harm, with Hadvar in charge by the fort praefect’s request. All its strength, all its support, now improving what had already been rebuilt.

42. *Hadvar*

“We already have foodstuffs in case of a siege,” the quartermaster said. “Should we have more?”

The two of them had a light lunch, some venison hunted from the forest.

“Only a little. Keep the troops’ morale high against the rebels.”

“Nice touch.”

“You’ve heard the stories?” Metilius asked. “About the rebel offensive?”

“Legatus Skulnar’s head, split in two, used as a plaything by the Dragonborn.”

“Did you know that they had history together?”

“No kidding?” the Centurion said, approaching their table.

“I reviewed some records in Bruma. One Junius Silanus, quartermaster for the Faithful Third.”

“No way. Emperor Attrebus’s boys?”

“Yes. He was honorably discharged after four years of service. No word on him till Darkwater.”

“So he was a Colovian?” Orthus asked.

“He was. Funny name for a Colovian, but I guess that’s how things are these days.”

“So what’s with Legatus Skulnar?”

“Skulnar was a Tribune for the Faithful Third. Junius must have worked for him.”

“Turncoat snowback,” Metilius said.

“Well, we’ll never know why he became one,” Orthus said.

Clouds covered the sky, and the work resumed. They expected help from the Pale Pass to arrive once a siege began. Some messenger pi-

geons, dreamsleeve transmissions, couriers on horseback. Then supplies and fresh troops, even veterans from the Great War. Or so they hoped. And Hadvar did for the Empire's light could not waver. Even under encroaching shadows.

"Move up, we need those logs to build."

Some oxen drivers grimaced, their beasts staying put.

"Sire, the oxen won't budge."

"We'll see about that."

Scared grunts, the wooden bridge across the ditch stable yet not sightly. Another order of timber from the mill far west, enchanted against fire. Hadvar walked up to the oxen and he pulled one by the nose ring. It followed his tug, and the other followed step. The first step onto the bridge, stability confirmed, then willing passage. They would not take chances so they dug in for all sides. Even if things got inconvenient.

"Alright, get the logs unloaded. Helgen ought to be safe from anyone who dares approach."

Some battlemages levitated the logs to their needed places. No time for legal quibbles, the war mattered more. Others took stone and rubble and cement, a fast concrete structure that should cure enough in a week. Far from ideal, but enough to halt the rebels at least. As long as no one stood on them, he thought.

"Tribune, everything in order?"

"It's alright, praefect," Hadvar answered.

"Good. If Helgen falls, then nothing can stand in the rebels' way."

A crash by the keep. The Tribune saw a woman rushing to pick up some items. The fort praefect sighed and walked to her.

"Quaestor, I told you to bring those items one by one. Now look at

what you have to do.”

“My apologies, Praefect.” She started picking up some items, but the Praefect only groaned.

“Leave some there, I’ll ask the quartermaster deal with them. Now move it!”

The Quaestor rushed on with whatever she could hold on to. Hadvar shook his head and he made for Helgen’s Eastern gate. He could walk through the road ahead and he would face the rebel army. Thousands of furious men, like caged beasts gone without food for days. They would find in Helgen their meal, only to be trapped by the Legion’s might.

And if that didn’t work, there was always Metilius’s plan to begin an avalanche.

Nubia

A certain time and place...

Another day, another bucket of ice cold water thrown at her face. She had been hanging from chains for a day, a week, a year, she never found out. She only knew how many buckets of ice cold water she had survived. A hundred-and-ten by now, from passers by. She saw no light, only a black cloth on her eyes. Heard no sound, only earplugs. Ate nothing, drank nothing. Magic keeping her alive, barely.

“Please, please, just kill me. I don’t care what you did to my men anymore, just kill me.”

Her memory of the invasion hazy now. Flashes of her fighting the fiend’s troops. A duel with the woman. Waking up chained like this.

And the buckets of ice cold water.

“Please, just kill me.”

A smack answered her pleas. At first, she had taunted them that her men would kill them all. She could not remember when she had switched to pleading for their lives. Only when she had started pleading for death.

Now magic coursed through her, sustaining her life. She could not remember what hunger or thirst had felt like. Only the pain of weakness, fatigue, sleepiness.

She felt that she was alone now. She could not remember how long a second was. She tried counting. Then she noticed that her counts were inconsistent. Finally she stopped caring and counted anyways.

Fifty. Five-hundred. Five-thousand. Then another bucket of ice cold water.

43. *Nubia*

“Please, why don’t you just kill me.”

No answer this time.

She hung there for longer, her mind turning blank. She had clung to her past with Zeran to keep sane. Now she knew only his name. She had remembered her men’s stories, their adventures together. Now she knew only that she was an adventurer. Darkness filled her vision every waking moment. Then her mind. Then her body, only magic sustaining it.

“Wake up, skeever feed.”

And so she did. But her name was Nubia, not skeever feed. She was—where again? No memories came to her. Only her name.

Someone undid her chains and her blindfold. Faintest light from torches nearly blinding. The woman who undid her binds loosed magic, and Nubia felt her eyes return to strength. A woman in strange armor, bearing a strange longsword.

“Where am I? Who am I?”

“You’ve been pardoned and released.”

“I was a criminal?”

“Killed your own family in cold blood, I heard.”

“O gods! I don’t even remember them!”

“But you’ve been pardoned. Turns out, someone casted frenzy on you, and you killed them under its influence.”

“But—but—how? Who casted it?”

“We’re still looking for him.”

“O gods!”

“Hey, hey, easy now.” The woman grasped her arms. “You’re safe now. Come, let’s get you a meal.”

Vittoria

Lore-das, 21 Morning Star

“Shipments to Windhelm delayed, m'lady.”

“I had that figured.”

Vittoria herself was there, on Solitude's lower level by the harbor. The walk down through the rampart stairs had tired her. Usually an errand boy would have sufficed. Yet times went hard for rebels had drained them of manpower.

“Did the Nords push out the East Empire Company men?”

“Nope. But shipping needs more caution. Pirates running free with naval support tied up in Dawnstar and the blockades by Eastmarch and Solstheim.”

“So when can we next send a ship?”

“We just did, three days ago. Taking a while though since they're hugging the coasts.”

“Oh well. I guess we'll just know once they get there.”

She climbed back up to Solitude's main street. A busy morning, houses and shops on both sides filled with merchants and customers. Refugees, too, from Forsworn and rebel attacks further south.

She had heard of the Jarl and his court who had come to Solitude. Rebels had taken his city, and Forsworn had ambushed him on the way. A scary fate for anyone.

Yet Vittoria could do not much beyond tend to her enterprise. Her cousin had been killed after a visit to Solitude during the ceasefire, right aboard his own ship. The thought scared her, the Emperor him-

44. Vittoria

self falling to an assassin's blade. No one could confirm who had owned it. She had heard only that the blade looked like one from the Oblivion Crisis, malicious, threatening, destructive. The Poenitus Oculatus had brought it to their headquarters for investigation. No word from them still, as Vittoria tended to her business.

"Dear, did you get a good word?"

"Nothing, Asgeir."

Her husband, a noble from a rebel family. They had met in a business deal to bring Black-Briar mead to Anvil. Now she had someone to help her expand her own holdings.

"War's been good to no one. If only Ulfric could get his head out of his own behind, Skyrim would be richer for it."

"We still have enough septims to last a lifetime, don't fret."

"I'm not fretting. I just wish that my people could go beyond irrational fighting and start being productive."

"That's what fretting is, dear."

A kiss on the cheek, followed by a nose flick. Vittoria giggled.

"Well if you're so worried, why not just help me sort this latest mess out?"

"What now?"

"Some pirates harassing trade convoys in the Sea of Ghosts."

"Those blasted Shatter-Shields at it again?"

"This time we're not sure."

"I wish I could make some ships appear out of thin air."

"Oh you."

She sat by the table and she opened a book to read. *The Reign of the Septims*, a special edition combining many old books about the Sep-

tim Dynasty. Always nice to know about those that came before, she thought. Tiber Septim's founding of the Empire. The many civil wars. Failed plots and schemes and expeditions abroad. Mad emperors and kings and empresses and queens. Looking back, only Uriel VII seemed to be competent, she thought. Only to fall in the Siege of Kvatch, survived by his bastard son acclaimed Emperor. Emperor Martin, his aide Bendu Olo, and many troops from Cyrodiil's guilds had fought in the Battlespire to expel Mehrunes Dagon from Mundus. Yet the Emperor had returned to a prior's life after the Crisis, dying young before the Interregnum.

Then the Medes had risen, supported by Nords and Colovians. Titus Mede had a long reign, and he did many deeds. His son Attrebus had reigned even longer. Vittoria's cousin had inherited the reins, then had lost each strand little by little. Till he had died at last.

"Dear, we have news from runners in Morrowind."

"I got it, thanks."

Vittoria greeted her guests by the door. What she saw shocked her. Her men in casts and bandages, using crutches to stand. A sore sight in this sore age.

"My lady," one of them started. "The Great Houses of Morrowind have declared in favor of Ulfric."

"Ulfric?" Her eyes widened. "Impossible. The dunmer would never support such a man."

"They did. Raided our ship. We tried fighting them off, but they paralyzed us and headed off with our goods."

"Gracious Akatosh," she swore. "I guess that's one shipment I'm never getting back."

"You lot better be off," her husband said as he came to her. "Get back to your homes before the mess gets here."

44. Vittoria

“Sire, we need this work.”

“Not while the war goes on,” Vittoria said. “We have too little to spare now.”

“Your families need you more,” Asgeir said. “Keep them safe. I’ll have some rations carted off to your doors.”

“Aye, thank you Sire.”

Vittoria could only sigh as she ate supper at sundown. The war had been tough on all imperial assets, but she never would have thought that trade would also suffer.

“That blasted Ulfric actually went and did it,” Asgeir said.

“I guess we can discount our Windhelm office now.”

“He’ll probably let it stay after the war. But I can tell that some dunmer or Stormcloaks have ransacked it or something.”

“Morrowind is now with Ulfric. And they sent a navy.”

“A very poor turn of events, yes.”

“The Elder Council needs to know.”

“Should we tell them?”

“Of course! The Empire needs this information.”

“Blast it, more war coming to our shores. Alright, I’ll have a mage send a dreamsleeve transmission.”

Vilkas

Fre-das, 20 Morning Star

“Helgen’s just up ahead.”

They had linked up with scattered camps who had been harrasing imperial supply caravans a few days back. Only Helgen remained to breach. Then the rest of Falkreath would follow.

“You think we should rest for a while, brother?”

Farkas yawned as their steeds trotted lazily through the broken road. Neither footman nor mage nor crossbowman rested for the whole five hours, if Vilkas counted correctly. Neither would the Companions.

“You already have a horse, icebrain. Enjoy the sights and views, we won’t have time to do so later.”

“I think a man needs rest before he starts killing.”

“Of course we’ll rest before the fight begins. That’s how battles work.”

“So it’s like when we go on missions and quests?”

“Yeah. Just think of the war as an extended quest or something.”

“Sounds soothing. Never was a stickler for chain of command.”

“Aye. Kodlak taught us well, at least. His successor proves a worthy one.”

“Make your bed this, clean your tent that. A Nord sleeps and rests wherever he so pleases.”

“Well I hope the snow suits your rest later.”

“Should be fine. Cold is a nice change from dragon fire.”

They halted just a stone's throw away from a mass of stakes and pikes up ahead. Some dunmer spoke in their tongue and they entered the forests around them. They had finally come.

"Troops!" Galmar shouted. "Stormcloaks! Ready yourselves, for we face King Ulfric's fallen tomb!"

Some laughed, others jeered. Everyone started moving into formations, following their unit leaders. Vilkas jumped off his horse, let someone else handle it. He drew his longsword and he roared.

"Hail Companion!"

"Hail my Nord brothers in arms!"

Those around him cheered. The swordsman took his place in front, aiming to join the first assault. Until Junius clasped his shoulder.

"No battle today."

"With our target in front of us?"

"We will besiege Helgen, try to make them surrender."

"Madness! The dogs are there ready for our slaughter."

"Not yet. Loyalists are too dug in, and we need to wittle them down one by one."

Vilkas sighed. "If the Harbinger says so."

He sat on a tree stump, hand clasping head. What frivolous war had, he thought. Warriors like him wanted not victory, not tactics. Only battle and glory.

"You're taking this well."

His brother joined him, sitting on the snow-covered ground. Vilkas laughed.

"That's why I'm second in command, and not you."

"Oh boys, you and your petty squabbles."

Aela joined them, still in her mailed tunic. Vilkas guessed that she also had expected battle.

“Well welcome to our little club.”

She took a seat on another tree stump. “Dragonborn could have at least told us what he was planning.”

“I’ll say,” Farkas said. “That means we’ll spend more time digging and building than fighting.”

“I wish that we could at least try to harass them,” Vilkas said. “Get in a few kills. Anything but wait around.”

Some rumbling echoed ahead, nothing that interested Vilkas. It seemed that he would get more time to enjoy the sights after all.

“Father fought in the Great War, wanted Kodlak to raise us,” he said. “He never would have expected seeing us fight against the Empire now!”

Laughter, some drinks passing around. All the Companions had gathered there that day.

“Well I’ll say,” a dunmer said. “I never would have thought being part of an army.”

“We’re not, Athis!” a Nibenayese woman said. “We’re just contracted to fight here, that’s all.”

“Easy for you to say, Ria,” Aela said. “You’ve never even used your money from contracts.”

“My parents back in Cheydinhal give me enough for feed.”

“What are you even saving for?” Farkas asked.

“Maybe try to get some land up here.”

“A fair goal,” Vilkas said. “Maybe you should ask the Dragonborn for a fief.”

45. *Vilkas*

Laughter and mocking hails. “Our hero, our hero claims a warrior’s—”

More rumbling, now louder and nonstop. Vilkas shot up, his sword ready. Yet only cannons greeted him, men setting them up and digging trenches around them.

“By the gods, what does that fiend plan?”

“This fiend,” Vilkas heard Junius from afar. “Plans to blast the loyalists to rubble.”

“You could have told us earlier?”

“Better than having the plan leak out.”

“Well I ought to bash your shoulders in if you weren’t our Harbinger.”

Laughter again.

“All’s well. You can rest and train for a month.”

“A month?” they all said.

“We moved too fast through the pass. They look strong over here, but that’s no matter for when the cannon have done their job.”

Vilkas grinned. “We’ll see about that. I’ll wait that month if it means I can get my sword in someone.”

Vilkas chatted the rest of the day with his Companions. He would lie in wait, with eroding patience, till he saw another day of combat, another day of ruin.

Claudia

Her inkwell shook as she wrote another letter. Some notice to the Falkreath Jarl, nothing important. Whatever caused the shaking, she needed to finish the letter before the Praefect woke.

Colovian legionaries and serjeants had come the other week, scouting for strongpoints. They had refused to go West of Helgen till they had assurances from Jarl Sidgeir, with only the Viscount's retinue volunteering to cross. So the Praefect had ordered a letter delivered by month's end. Of course, it had needed revisions and edits a lot. Now she needed this version done before the Praefect woke.

Her quill ran across paper, jotting words of information, of intelligence, of reconaissance, words that the Praefect had made her write. She had put it off till today, of course. Now she needed it finished before the Praefect woke.

Now her table shook, and she smudged her letter. She flinched and froze, fearing what the Praefect could say. She took another sheet of paper, and she prayed to Julianos that she would finish it before the Praefect woke.

Her handwriting now sloppier, the nearby lamp flickering. It mattered little as long as the Jarl could read it. As long as the Praefect could read it. She hurried writing what she had written, up till the smudged words. Now she continued jotting down from her notes of what to write. The Legion demanded efficiency, discipline, and obedience. Not necessarily in that order. The Colovians had been encamped on the road to Pale Pass for over three weeks. Now she felt secure that she could finish the letter before the Praefect woke.

"Quaestor!" the Praefect shouted from across the room. "Get your-

self in your armor, gods damn it! The Stormcloaks are here!”

The quaestor fumbled with her quill, bumped the inkwell which spilled. She darted out of her chair and she dashed to her quarters, hurrying to put on her lamellar and helmet.

“What about the Colovians?” she asked.

“They left the other day to secure the Pale Pass.”

Stendarr smite me, she thought. At the very least, she finally had excitement. She grabbed a shortsword and headed outside. Scorpions and ballistae had already started loosing shots at dark shapes circling overhead. Shadow legionaries fired bolts into the distance, casted wards around town. She realized where the shaking had come from when iron and stone balls cracked around town against the wards. One of the shapes overhead became bigger till two wings appeared around it, and a run of smoke and flame.

“Get down!” a legionary shouted. Wards appeared overhead, shielding them. Claudia heard scorpion bolts whizz above, and a loud bellow. One of the dragons must have been hit.

“Get to your station, quaestor!” the Praefect shouted.

“Yes, Praefect!” she replied. She hurried to legionaries huddled by a street corner.

“Get a hold of yourselves!” she said. “We’re not going to win just by standing around. Form up, get ready at my mark.”

The legionaries nodded and they fell into formation. Altmer shadow legionaries readied ice spikes, spearmen formed shieldwalls, swordsmen held enchanted shields above against dragonfire. Their cohesion fell apart as a cannon ball hit before them, shrapnel shredding through their shields.

“Keep together!” she barked. “The wards will keep you safe!”

Fireballs soared downwards, dragonriders releasing them in volleys. A few ballistae loosed at them, missing only by sword's length. The dragons kept their runs, hay and banners burning in their wake. Whenever one turned around, its rider loosed spells into the fort. The first wave threw fireballs, all next threw magicka flares.

"Keep down!" Claudia said. One legionary's ward failed, and his shield broke apart into splinters. That one dashed inside, but a flare caught him before he entered. Limbs and guts and stray flesh and muscle scattered over the shieldwall.

The bombardment kept up, destroying keeps and structures unlucky to have no wards when the Praefect sounded the alarm. Now Claudia ordered her troops forward, hoping to face the rebels and stop them. Yet no one came, and the bombardment ceased.

"Is it all clear?" a legionary from a distance cried.

"Keep at your posts!" the quastor shouted. "The rebels are due to strike at any time."

They waited, kept in formation, yet nothing. Quiet prevailed for an hour, then two. Many legionaries had collapsed in wait, medics and healers carting them off inside.

"All clear!" a voice sounded. "Tribune says all clear!"

The legionaries all sighed, and started chatting with each other. Some went back to their tasks before the struggle, if they could still do it amid flame and rubble. Others went for the mess, devouring food and drink. Claudia herself sighed, and she went back for her letter.

The spilled inkwell had done its job, and now she needed to redo the letter again. She could barely make out what she had written, and she jotted down the letter once more. Some changes here and there hurt no one, she thought.

She made her way to the Praefect's quarters, made a salute after

the door opened. He darted his eyes across the letter, then nodded.

“Have three more copies ready, the couriers are waiting downstairs.”

Claudia sighed as she slumped back in her chair, her hands covering her face. She took three pieces of paper and wrote through all three. Now she cared not whether anyone could read it, as long as the couriers had them.

She climbed downstairs, just as the sun had set. Three horsemen with couriers, ready to make their own ways for Falkreath.

“Thank you for this,” one said.

“We’ll be off.”

Their horses galloped off, just when another round of cannonfire made its way across Helgen. This time a magicka flare reached for the Eastern gate, and the courier there exploded into fine mist. The quaestor only grimaced, her fine work now torn to shreds. She whistled, and she called for troops to stand at attention once more.

That night had legionary nerves wracked as the bombardment ebbed and flowed, ceased and continued. Claudia felt safer in the torturer’s office, far below what anyone could do above ground. For all that she knew, the fort and town would be rubble by daybreak.

She climbed above a bed, took some shuteye as torches around flickered, died. She awoke in quiet, reached for some water to wash her face. Then another round of cannonfire erupted, the water pan spilling over her uniform. She sighed and made for a now lit torch to dry herself off.

“Quaestor!” the Praefect called out to her. “Get some troops and lead them to the cave exit. We need scouts to report on rebel positions, and the ones we sent have not yet returned.”

“Aye, praefect!”

She had twelve troops with her, bearing shortswords and bucklers and bows and arrows. A lone shadow legionary, if they would encounter mages. They steadied past the creek, into the bear cave, then the exit. She could hear blasts from this far away. They made their way through the new path heading to Skybound Pass's Southern Watch. Muddy gullies and small rockslides had formed there since the new renovation. They paid no heed to the rough surface, kept focus on reaching the summit. At last they came upon wounded scouts and spies, languishing by the watchtower.

"Quaestor!" one called out. "In the pass! Leave us to die!"

She finished processing what the soldier said when arrows came out. The wounded fell to them, and Claudia faced one biting into her shin.

She pointed to the entrance, and their sole shadow legionary blasted flames and frost at once. A few rebels dashed outside, screaming as their hair burned. The legionaries made short work of them.

"Come out and surrender!" she said. A shock bolt answered her, hitting her lamellar and forcing her to the ground. The shadow legionary casted a ward, broken by an exploding crossbow bolt. The time spared, however, let Claudia rally her troops now charging into the pass.

They cut a swathe through ill-trained rabble, desperate dunmer, a few Colovian traitors. The rebel mages casted runes which fell to the shadow legionary's skill. Magicka flares erupted around them, wards blocking them for archers to return the favor. A few yelps and gulps echoed, and the shadow legionary casted frost and flame to block the rebels' vision with steam. The legionaries went to every nook and cranny with a slain rebel after.

Now Claudia went back to the tower, her troops taking positions around her. "Have the pass collapse," she told the shadow legionary. "The rebels are funelling troops and supplies from Whiterun here."

A few stacks of gunpowder, some runes, and a flame vortex after-

wards. A loud crash echoed through the Falkreath air, and no one could now pass to or from Whiterun. Now Claudia heard loud murmurs from the path leading to the Riften road, and she saw rebel scouts checking the ruckus.

She threw a dart to their bear-suited captain, and the legionaries formed one mass to push the rebels down. Their axes and blades striked from above, the legionaries thrust from below. The long skirmish saw the rebels hack and slash to no avail, the legionaries parry and thrust and beat back their foes. What few survived dash for their siege camp, bows and arrows keeping them from alerting their fellow rebels too early.

“Make back for Helgen,” she ordered. Below, she could see cannons arrayed in rings, each piece alternating on the ground and on a mound, rebel mages and dragonriders itching for another round against Helgen. Rebel troops trading blows in mock combat. More rebels forming up in mockery of formations, a rabble playing at soldier. No imperial formation, no shieldwall, just children putting shields together, swords and spears lumped the same facing Helgen. Gritting her teeth, she took a bow and loosed onto those below. Her sole defiance in this trying time.

They entered Helgen through the cave, just as another round of cannonfire erupted. The Praetor questioned her, and she told all that she saw. Now she headed for her corner for rest.

“What in Oblivion did you do there?”

She awoke as torches were being relit, refilled, replaced. The Praetor was standing over her as she lay in bed.

“The rebels suddenly began loosing cannonfire and mage blasts from Skybound Pass. I thought you destroyed the pass, and now suddenly they’re in full force there now.”

“I only destroyed the pass, Praetor.”

“Oh you did? You knew the rebels knew of a good vantage point, yet you never took the care to do anything else? They can easily restore the pass no matter how tunneled in it is.”

“But your orders—”

“Forget it, I’ll just inform the Tribune that the rebels found a different vantage point.”

Claudia sighed as she slumped back into her bed. If only that man never came, she thought.

Carcette

Morn-das, 23 Morning Star

Gregor

Brelyna

Vilkas

Galmar

Runil

“As I commend your souls to Aetherius, blessings of the—” Runil sighed. “Blessings of the Eight Divines upon you, for you are the salt and earth of Nirn, our beloved brothers and sisters.”

His daily prayer finished, the graveyard quiet even in midst of war. Guardsmen started burying the last mass grave, and Runil sighed as he walked to the spring. They had started throwing bodies into the creek when the graveyard had filled, Helgen’s fallen left to rot exposed. He had to fight to let them have a proper burial. Even together in a pile, comrades in death as in battle. No news came yet about those who fell from the first invasion. The rebels would have burned their bodies, Runil guessed. Or had left them for animals and elements to scavenge.

Their Jarl Sidgeir yawned and started chattering with those nearby. He had joined their ceremony as a formality. Now he spoke ill of the dead.

“These cretins are really the best that the Legion could station in Helgen? My, even my guards could do better,” he said.

“My Jarl, don’t you think—”

“Now, now, Helvard, your bandit escapade by Lakeview taught me that I need my own men to do things right. I’ll have you muster your guardsmen that you spent the whole winter training.”

“For the city’s defense?”

“Well, I was going to try taking Lakeview again, but I guess we can always let the Dragonborn come to us.”

“Very well, my Jarl.”

Poor souls, Runil thought. Condemned to fight another fruitless battle. He knew who and what would come for them all. A dragon shaped like a man, with a will to conquer and dominate. Like Nord stories told of Talos, Tiber Septim. Had his first child aborted to secure his legitimate line. Had used his own battlemage's beating heart to conquer Alinor. Had killed many families who would not bow to him.

Now his successor would come for all of them.

"You'll have your usual, Runil?"

"Sure, Valga."

Pickled fish and hunter's broth, Artaeum style. Reminded him of home, before all this. Before what he had done for the Dominion. What he had done to the Empire's sons and daughters.

Only the Dragonborn had discovered his secret.

"Have it on the house. Divines know how hard it is being a priest of Arkay in these times."

"More donations, at least."

"More work, too. We here ought to help each other in these times."

"Thanks, Valga."

Runil ate his food in silence. A short prayer to Arkay, thanking him for the life given by his food. A hearty meal, Runil's own recipe that he had taught to Valga. A popular dish, she had told him.

"You think they'll have more bodies to bury tomorrow?"

"I told them to bury them outside the city. So much land, yet they still want our graveyard to bury them. The rot will mess up our health here."

"Wonder how Helgen is, though."

"From what I heard, more broken than when the dragon attacked."

“Oh my.”

“Siege took one month. Could have held longer, but dysentery started spreading.”

“How?”

“Bombardment messed with the plumbing. That’s why we can’t have the bodies just be exposed.”

Valga gulped.

“Don’t be scared, lass. Falkreath won’t fall to that fate.”

“But how do you know?”

“Keep faith in Arkay. Then you won’t be scared.”

“I might very well buy an amulet from you.”

“Have mine. We here ought to help each other in these times.”

Runil returned to the Hall of the Dead. Just one man, the Thane Dengeir. Prayers to the old totem gods, to his ancestors.

“You heard the news, Thane?”

“Just did. Helgen should have surrendered when it had the chance. Maybe we ought, too.”

“There’s still Fort Neugrad for them to deal with. Have no fear, Thane.”

“Who said that I fear their coming?”

Runil sighed. “I’ll leave you to your prayers, Thane.”

Life in the Arena was hard, tough. Shezarr’s testing grounds for mortals to attain the syllable of royalty, some say. The Thalmor begged to differ, he thought. So would he, till he had realized what he had done for them. Legionary blood on his hands, never fading from memory.

“Make way, make way.”

Carriages holding the dead, cloth covering their view but not their stench. The injured marching slowly beside them.

“Where to, Runil?”

“This way. Follow me.”

He led them to a cave by the roadside. Used to house a cult of assassins, now just a derelict cave. Militiamen carried the bodies inside, piled them on top each other. The work took long and they gave up in the end, just dumping the bodies haphazardly.

“As I commend your souls to Aetherius, blessings of the Eight Divines upon you, for you are the salt and earth of Nirn, our beloved brothers and sisters.”

The cave was filled to the brim with bodies, sealed by earth and rubble, then a stone cover. Terms of surrender, the officer said. The dead were allowed to be buried by Falkreath.

“Did anyone survive?”

“All captured. Well,” he rubbed his head. “Some escaped to Fort Neugrad.”

“What of those aiding the burials?”

“I was the only legionary allowed to help. Falkreath militamen had been the ones helping out bury the bodies.”

“What is your rank, son?”

“Centurion, under Tribune Hadvar’s command.”

“Your commanding officer?”

“All safe in Fort Neugrad. Methinks he’ll have to escape again, though.”

“I will pray for him, and you, and all of you.”

“Thank you.”

More bodies to be delivered tomorrow, then the next day. Three thousand counted dead from dysentery, another thousand in the assault. The rest injured and ill. Maybe a hundred escaped without harm. Then many more taken prisoner.

The Centurion took the carriages and left back for Helgen. A militiaman would deliver tomorrow's batch, Runil mused.

He walked back to his chamber in the Hall of the Dead, washing himself and his robes from infection. He remembered what he had told Valga. Divines knew whether Falkreath would suffer the same fate. He could not picture civilians, young and old, men and women, dying from dysentery. He knew what it was like during the Great War. Anvil had suffered it. Bravil had. Leyawiin had. The Dominion only had to taint their food and water, and they had fallen.

He cleared his mind of those thoughts, drifted to sleep. He prayed that Arkay guide his dreams, that he think only of life in this time of death.

Hadvar

“You think we should evacuate the fort?”

Hadvar only stared at the ceiling, too tired from the past week to even think.

“Tribune, we need to act fast.”

“Let me have this peace. Then we can start planning.”

The Tribune waved off his quartermaster, whose voiced he had just recognized. Creak of door shutting. Drop of snow melting as spring came in. Their positions in Fort Neugrad only a formality, being stuck in some mountain far from the rebellion’s advance.

Why would they keep fighting, knowing what force lay against them? His body had been wrapped in many bandages. His armor had hurt him when he had tried putting it on. Even walking pained him. Only his bed’s comfort could give him peace.

Peace of death against the rebellion’s tide, a pleasant thought. The Dragonborn could send some men to blow up the fort, unleash a blizzard, get some dragons to burn everyone inside and melt the stone with it. What did his orders mean if he had no way to fulfill them? Why would he bother fighting more? Helgen lost again, to another dragon, with a will to conquer and dominate. The rebels would need not even lift a finger for Tiber Septim’s aid. The new Dragon of the North could do it alone.

He could mantle him, even. The Empire’s founder had learned the syllable of royalty from some heathen dunmer god, reshaped Cyrodiil’s jungles, let them be again after he grew bored of the new landscape. Hadvar remembered hearing about swampy jungles to the south, tem-

perate rainforests by the heartlands, warm and moist air by East Colovia, cold mountains rivalling Skyrim's cool to the north. He had been in Colovia twice, first after his promotion to Tribune, next his visit to the Count. Reinforcements had been tied up by the Pale Pass, Stormcloak skirmishers keeping them away. Then dysentery had started spreading through the troops, and no one had the power to keep guard by trenches and palisades anymore.

Then the had rebels struck, and whoever had strength to keep fighting had fallen in their fury. Ulfric's dogs had filled in the trenches, had killed everyone. Hadvar would have died too, if Metilius had never asked for a parley.

The Tribune moved himself up, sitting by his bed's edge. His first spear should have returned by now.

"Tribune, please have yourself to the food."

The fort's praefect slid a plate of Colovian War Torte, a specialty in Falkreath. He had eaten it many times in Helgen, and the memory bit him for the meal reminded him of what had happened.

"Thank you, praefect."

"So, what business do you have with me?"

Hadvar bit into his meal, hearty filling after days avoiding infected rations. "We need to pull our men out of here."

"I expected you to say that, Sire."

"This place is a deathtrap. We need our men fighting in Bruma or Falkreath."

"I have to say, it will be a shame, leaving. I've manned this fort for a decade now."

"You fought in the Great War?"

"I was part of the vanguard in Red Ring. Served under General

Jonna herself.”

“How is she, by the way?”

“Retired to Bleaker’s Way, near Bruma.”

“Right. How was the battle like?”

“I could always tell it like the history books. Legatus Justianus Quintus has a knack for telling war stories.”

“Tell it like how you saw it for yourself.”

The praefect sighed. “What can I say? Stayed near Cheydinhal, sparred with Fighters’ Guild members for a good while. Then one day the General comes and tells us it’s time.”

Hadvar leaned in, listening to the praefect’s story.

“Our first stop was Fort Urasek. Dominion used it as a watchpost, some telepathy lines running straight to Lord Naarifin. Shadow legion mages took care of the guards. I lead a contubernium to the castellan. He never saw me stab his gut. ”

A hearty laugh, and the praefect moved on.

“We marched south of Red Ring. Imperial City looked battered. Took Fort Magia two days later. Had to tunnel our way under it, take out the elves from below. Some shadow legionaries did some magic to interrupt distress calls, I don’t know.”

The fireplace flickered as a light rain started.

“We had some men by that Ayeleid Ruin, Vilverin. Moved into the Imperial Prison’s sewers. Same place Chancellor Ocato escaped in, so too the Emperor and his Blades when the Oblivion Crisis started. Same with that man Bendu Olo and his friend Arnelis some time after. Meanwhile, we took out Fort Alessia and began to link up with General Decianus. Of course, the elves finally found out and sent in their troops from Skingrad and Bravil. I remember the battle, them

pushing up against our center while our boys from Fort Alessia hit their rear. Enveloped them, crushed them. Took another two days to end the Aldmeri there.”

“What about the Imperial City?”

“We marched in and started hacking away at anyone who looked gold or yellow. The Emperor himself took out Naarifin. Some men hung him from the White-Gold tower. Never really knew what happened to him afterward.”

“Can you tell me more about the assault?”

The praefect sighed. “The Poenitus and Shadow legionaries by the sewers took out all guards by the Prison Isle. They held the prison to distract other Aldmeri troops. The rest of us went to the Talos Isle first. I remember fighting my way to the Arboretum Isle. Some elf mage across every corner, only to die to some shadow legionary or some archer. Runes and mines, too. A buddy of mine lost a leg to one.”

“Is he okay?”

“He died in Helgen when Alduin came back.”

“Oh, my apologies.”

“No worries, Tribune.” Some grunting. “After the Arboretum, we fought our way to the Arcane University’s Isle. Ironically, no mages holed up there. Only a few Bosmer and Khajiit auxiliaries, easy enough to deal with. We rested there, then got told that the battle had ended.”

“Wow.”

“Many of us old veterans are sick of fighting, but would gladly do so.” The rain had turned into a thunderstorm, eating away at whatever snow remained. “Whatever choice you make, Tribune, I’m glad to follow it.”

“What would you suggest?”

“Use the fort as a base to skirmish at the rebels. Draw them away from Falkreath. Give the populace more time to evacuate.”

“Evacuate?”

“No way that we can hold Falkreath. Count Carvain left me a message while you were out cold. Bruma has pulled out its forces back to defend the Pale Pass against attack.”

“By the gods.”

“Of course, nothing wrong in your plan either. I just hope that Falkreath’s citizens make it out. Maybe move to Whiterun, or Markarth.”

“We’ll hide in the Jerall Mountains, bide our time till the rebels hit Falkreath’s walls.”

“The troops will have to build cabins and set up equipment again, Tribune.”

“Only way that we can strike. They will probably rest in the Dragonborn’s estate for a week or so till they move toward Falkreath.”

“Alright. But let me send a pigeon to Falkreath first, have the people evacuate.”

“Of course.”

The storm continued, and finally the legionaries left their fort. Whatever they could, they brought with them. They condemned the rest to ashes.

“You sure about this, Tribune?” Metilius asked.

“I am.”

“You think the rebels will besiege Falkreath?”

“They’ll assault it straight. Jarl didn’t want to set up defenses be-

yond guards and legionaries.”

“Then we’ll hit them like a hammer.”

“We will. Keep faith in Stendarr. And in Talos.”

“The gods know how much we pay to keep faith in Him.”

The legionaries marched through ridges and crags, past muddy gullies and snowy ditches. They would endure a few more weeks of pain. Just enough to stop the rebellion in a surprise move.

Hadvar pleaded for Talos to hear him, to help save the Empire that he had founded.

Jordis

“No one is in the fort.”

The housecarl

“We need to get to Bruma.”

Lydia

Brelyna

“So you married Junius?”

Brelyna sighed, the eight time Lydia had asked this question. She sipped from a jug of Flin, Junius’s own recipe. Her ancestors knew she needed it.

“For the last time, yes. We went straight to RIFTEN after he graduated and we said our vows in front of Mara and your other Nordic gods and his friends and family and what few friends I have here.”

“But you never came to see me!”

“Whenever Junius asked, you just wrote that you were handling his Whiterun burdens.”

“But you two never invited me to the wedding!”

“You threw a jealous fit after he married Jordis.”

“Because she’s too perfect and docile! No way I wouldn’t get insecure with that competition.”

The Lakeview was calm that day. Only a spring breeze over Lake Ilinalta would sound, a far cry from what had happened there half a year ago.

Mercurio

Mjoll

Helvard

“Word from ahead?”

Helvard looked on the tired, dishevelled legionary before him. The man had scouted ahead with a few other horsemen, and now stood here alone.

“Rebels coming in full force. We skirmished with their vanguard. Their mages blasted the other scouts to Oblivion. I got off my horse and dashed to the forest, then all the way here.”

The housecarl leaned in. “So they’re close?”

“Aye.” At that point, the scout shook, then collapsed, guardsmen holding him. They took him to the guardhouse, that priest Runil following. Helvard sighed, left for the longhouse.

A few legionary horsemen had brought word that Tribune Hadvar was nearby, and needed only a day to arrive in full force. Helvard hoped that Falkreath could hold out for even a day, just so the rebels would face an army in the field where the legion dominated. If only his hopes had borne out before, then he could hope with fury. But he couldn’t.

“So the rebels had come, it seems.” The Jarl yawned lazily on his throne, studying the longhouse idly. “I’ll see that I leave for Bruma at once.”

“My Jarl, the city needs leadership.”

“Hence your training the past months. Get the guards ready now, I’ll be off with my court.”

Helvard nodded, a lump in his throat. By Stendarr, he thought. By Stendarr, if the legion could come here now, what he would do to let it

be.

Yet no gods answered him, only flaming arrows entering the city. "O Talos," he swore.

He dashed for the west gate, rallying whatever guardsmen and militia he could come across. Their barricade there had been opened a little for the horsemen, now hastily filled with old chairs and tables. Archers and mercenaries on the walls loosed faster and faster, signs of a skirmish now surging into a battle.

“”

Galmar

Orthus

He had worked with cannons in the East Empire Company. He knew what they could do. Adelaissa Vendicii had told of barrages blasting Japhet's Folly to rubble, pirates and bandits crushed under falling stone. When he had joined the Legion, he had found that barely any belonged to them by then.

But in their relief of the assault on Fakreath, Orthus Endario found himself in charge of a battery. Their shells and shots teared through rebel columns marching and charging to Falkreath. A few lucky mages found the battery's position. Shadow legionaries took care of them in due course.

A line of soldiers had gathered by the cannons. Tribune Hadvar must have already begun his advance, he thought. And so he would begin his own.

"Legionarii parati!" he began. "Mandata Captate!"

"Sic adiutor!" they replied.

"Ad fulcon et ami Fulco cum ordine seque! Equaliter ambula ab silvā. Percute canēs Vulfrici!"

"Sic adiutor!"

"Imperium Lex Est."

"Lex Sacra Est!"

The legionaries made ready, and they heard their adiutor's orders. A shieldwall, and a charge into Ulfric's dogs. The Empire was law, and the law was sacred. And Orthus would rather give his life in Falkreath's forests than let the law be sullied and blasphemed.

He raised his shortsword and rallied his men forwards. They

cheered and advance in shieldwall, spears in front and sides. Storm-cloak javelins met them, deflected by enchantments. Shadow legionaries loosed lightning from their tortoise.

Erik

Erik the Slayer swung his sword through a legionary's neck and he dashed from a rushing orc. He feinted left and he hit right, goring his foe's armpit past lamellar.

"Gods damn you loyalists," he swore.

He drew back and he dashed away from Falkreath's gates, the loyalist barrage tearing through his host. Some dunmer shot shock and flame at where they thought the fire came from. Erik shook them aside.

"Get outta here. The battle's lost."

"Not without the Dragonborn's orders."

"Damn his orders!"

Erik blew a horn, waved his sword in the air. "Rally to me! We might live yet."

A shell blasted beside him. Shrapnel bit into his leg, stopped only by his greaves' padding. Erik groaned yet he kept moving, thrusting his sword into any loyalist who dared remain.

Some men formed a shieldwall around him, crossbows loosing into legionaries charging into the retreating lines now jagged and broken from cannonfire and mageblast. A dragon flew overhead for a run, ballista bolt clipping its wing and making it tumble and crash, now prey to auxiliaries throwing javelins and thrusting spears. The Slayer pointed his sword backwards, and his shieldwall began marching in retreat.

A cannon ball hit beside the shieldwall, padding behind shields catching the shrapnel. Routing rebels around them began forming up,

the army's rearguard joining them.

“Galmar and the Dragonborn have declared a retreat,” the rearguard commander said. “”

Hrongar

Gregor

Lydia

Ulfric

“We have word from Falkreath, my Jarl.”

A courier, sweat and grime covering his face. Smell of sulphur and blood.

“Did we win?”

“No, my Jarl.”

The jarl’s eyes widened. “By the gods. How many did we lose?”

“Only two tenths. The Dragonborn and Galmar ordered a retreat when they found no chance of victory.”

“We have them, at least.” A sigh. “How did we lose?”

“The loyalists had men hidden in the woods. Started with a cannon barrage, ended with a charge.”

“Very well.” Ulfric sank into the Dragonsreach throne. “Get some rest.”

A defeat, the first time since Darkwater. The courier slugged out of the keep, to a well-deserved rest. The future High King growled, and he marched to the dragonpit behind. He shouted flame into the sky, rage powering his Voice.

Horik

Bryling

“My lady, preparations are ready.”

“Very well, Horil,” the governor said. “Sound the horn.”

Bryling watched as the housecarl sounded his horn for everyone to hear. Legionaries, auxiliaries, militiamen, Pale soldiers, all shouted

Carcette

Helvard

“I would have expected a parade after our crushing victory.”

His Jarl yawned as he walked around the city, strolling without looking at the damage too intently. Legionaries had scattered, had imposed order after the rebels had retreated. No one still felt safe. Muggings and robberies had happened during the battle’s heat. Even then, when legionaries kept the peace. No one wanted to take chances, either.

“Good man, where do you go?” the housecarl said.

“We’re getting to Bruma,” he said. “Even if the rebels are gone now, divines know when they’ll come back.”

“Please have no worry! The legion is here!”

“That didn’t help in Whiterun or Helgen. My family’s safety matters more.”

The family had loaded their things onto a cart behind an ox, and they readied for the Pale Pass. Helvard knew not whether the rebels would let them through. County Bruma’s troops had made for the Pale Pass shortly before the siege. Maybe they would let the man and his charges in.

“My, the townspeople are rather bashful,” the Jarl said. “They should be thankful that we saved their lives.”

Helvard stuttered. “Why, yes, my Jarl.”

“Well if things are going the way they are, I ought to take a vacation in Bruma, don’t you think?”

Helvard exhaled. “My Jarl, Falkreath needs you.”

“Better that I’m safe then.”

"But the rebels hold all lands to the Pale Pass." He had given up reasoning with his Jarl's duties.

"The rabble are reeling from their defeat. You stay here now and keep the peace while I'm gone."

The housecarl retreated to his home for the night. The next day, the Jarl's hall was deserted. No one, not even guards stayed.

Only Thane Dengeir.

"Well, Helvard, I guess we here both have Falkreath's best interests in heart."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Is it really worth it, fighting for a Jarl who would leave his people in the middle of the night?"

"I swore my sword to him."

"That he may give favors to you and the hold."

"Damn it, Dengeir. The Empire reigns in Falkreath. Ulfric's rebellion will lose. Don't even bother talking of treason."

"Treason? Did Sidgeir not commit treason when he fled?"

"The Jarl has his own reasons."

"Either way, your sword is no longer sworn to him. Look around!"

His voice echoed through the empty hall.

"Is this what fighting for the Empire gets us? Is this how Falkreath survives? Our swords should go somewhere who will give us our due."

"And Ulfric would do that? Just as he gave the Reachmen their due?"

"I'm no man's fool." He sighed. "I know Ulfric's selfish and power-hungry, but he's the devil I know." He sat on the Jarl's throne. "You think some Emperor sitting on a gilded throne in Cyrodiil is going to know what's best for Skyrim?"

Helvard's face tightened, yet he said nothing.

"The Imperial City's so far from here, it might as well be on one of the moons," Dengeir said. "And yet the Empire thinks it can tell us what to do an' how to live. What are Falkreath's coffers being used for? Polishing the Emperor's gold? We can barely live with what they let us keep!"

"You want to be Jarl again, Dengeir?"

"Why not? For one thing, I won't empty Falkreath's coffers to buy myself fine clothes an' expensive mead."

Helvard flinched.

"For another, I won't get mixed up with criminals and other sorts who take advantage of the honest folk for profit."

The housecarl's lip quivered.

"I might be old, but I haven't forgotten that a Jarl's first duty is to look after his people."

Helvard grasped his head. "I need to get home."

"You're welcome here anytime. Your loyalties are to Falkreath first, and I can respect a man who loves his land and his people."

Helvard rested on his bed, sleepless. Only thoughts of the recent siege in his mind. The sun had risen when he drifted asleep.

He woke and he ate a meal of bread and olives. The square outside the Jarl's longhouse had legionaries in a tent. They had been busy trying looters, hanging them. A few Stormcloaks joined them on the gallows. Stragglers, unlucky captures. Militiamen kept watch, replacing the guardsmen who had fled with Jarl Sidgear. The legionary commander oversaw the life leaving the condemned. He nodded, and the bodies were released. He stepped on the gallows and gave a speech.

"Citizens of Falkreath," he said. "I am Tribune Hadvar, General

Tullius's envoy to this city. Rest assured that we shall keep the peace in cooperation with housecarl Helvard."

"What happened to the Jarl?" a townsman said.

"We evacuated him to County Bruma for his own safety."

"How?" another one asked. "The rebels have all roads from here to Helgen under their keep."

"We have a passage over the mountains. We gave it to the Poenitus Oculatus's control just before we relieved the siege."

"Are you sure we'll be safe here? Our things will stay safe?"

"We want everyone to stay at home while the legion restores order. Many had taken advantage of the siege to wreak havoc. We need a week to restore control here."

"You got that right, Hadvar."

Thane Dengeir stepped out of the longhouse, militiamen blocking the gate to Falkreath's main road.

"What's going on, Thane?"

"I simply wished to see the legion off."

"Going to Country Bruma?"

"Yes. The legion, that is."

"Pardon me?"

The thane smirked. "You think you lot can intimidate the sons of Skyrim through force and coercion. To step down on Nords' faces with an Imperial boot." The militiamen started growling. "But I, the new Jarl of Falkreath, declare you unwelcome. Leave now, or I shall make you."

"Thane Dengeir, this city has seen enough fighting. Tell your men to stand down, and we can negotiate."

“So you can take me unawares? Only a cornered rat tries to bargain.” He turned to the militia. “As your new Jarl, I order you to round up all legionaries in the city and hole them in Sidgeir’s room.”

“Aye.”

The militiamen drew their arms and inched forward. Some legionaries drew their own and charged. They found only hammers and axes.

“No need to make this hard for all of us, Deneir! Surrender now, and we will treat you well—”

“Damn it, Hadvar, get out of here!” a centurion said.

“Metilius! What about you?”

“Tell the Legion what I did today.”

“Aye.”

The militiamen charged and fought with the remaining legionaries. Helvard stayed aside, watching it unfold.

“Legionaries! Rally to your Tribune!” the centurion shouted. Metal boots sounded outside the square. Then furious shouts rang, clash of steel and sound of spell echoing throughout Falkreath. The militia had all thrown their lot with the new Jarl.

The Tribune’s party fought their way to the creek and pond. Little water, only the faintest stench of death. They rushed for the gate there, their last exit from the city. Some militiamen threw javelins at their path. Staff and guards took one each, jumping in front of the Tribune. Only three other men survived the escape.

Helvard stayed in the longhouse while fighting raged outside. At day’s end, Stormcloak boots entered the city triumphant. Any surviving legionaries were cramped into Sidgeir’s room. They had little air to breathe, and a few were hysterical by sunrise. Many had died standing up overnight.

Ralof

The sound of exploding powder echoed through the Hjaalmarch swamps. Stone and iron shots flew into Morthal's walls and a throng of berserkers readied ladders.

Jordis

The setting spring sun lit Bruma's snow-topped lands. Jordis kept a hood over her head, drawing away suspicious eyes. She never knew if a Poetnitus Oculatus was watching. If Falkreath's refugees had links with the Empire. If the former Jarl had any interest in aiding his masters.

"So I jumped into the battle and started fighting the Stormcloak dogs. It was a fun exercise, but my safety was at risk. I left the city and the hold to the legion for safekeeping."

The former Jarl was giving a speech to some bystanders, mesmerized by false bravery. Jordis sighed. At least one of her worries never came to pass.

"The rabble thought that they could take on me, Jarl elected by Falkreath. I planned the entire battle myself."

The housecarl rolled her eyes under her hood. She ate her Colovian spaghetti in silence as the former Jarl gave his speech. She had another mission to fulfill there in Bruma.

"Miss Hyördís?" a guardsman asked.

"Aye. I have a proposition for the Count's consideration."

"Very well. Good luck on your venture."

Jordis stepped inside the castle, feeling safe at last. Bruma's knights and serjeants had the castle under watch. She sighed, tension loosing from her body. A servant showed her a nice room, meant for diplomats.

She thought of Junius, prayed to Shor for His guidance, prayed to Ysmir Talos for His blessings. She felt a rush praying to the banned gods in Cyrodiil. Only Count Carvain's loyalties reminded her of safety.

72. *Jordis*

She woke the next day

Lydia

Vilkas

Mercurio

Bryling

Hadvar

Junius

“Was it worth it, Junius?”

A specter of an old man wearing purple, of a man from Nibenay young and spirited, their voices one yet not one. The Dragonborn froze in his war tent, some distance away from Morthal. A specter long forgotten yet never gone from memory.

“Do you believe madness a curse, Junie-boy? For some, it is the greatest of blessings. A bitter mercy, perhaps, but mercy nonetheless.”

A cold spring wind blew, and Junius saw nothing but his tent’s insides. He sighed, tension releasing through his body. The battle tonight would still be for long.

“Sappers, take down the palisade!” he barked. Tullius’s forces still remained by the docks. A simple flanking could take them out.

The palisade buckled and broke under the sappers’ work. Pale militiamen poured into the gaps, crossbows making ready by the sawmill. Some stragglers grappled with them, getting flung into the river below. Troops beyond the bridge saw the struggle and lifted the drawbridge.

“Talos smite me,” Junius swore. Imperial archer volleys bit into the advancing columns, dunmer wards protecting them. Across the bridge, behind the drawbridge lay a barricade, set up by reinforcements. The old watchtower had fallen into cinders by then. Junius pointed at the drawbridge, and his troops threw bottles of mead and ale. YOL TUUR SHUL. The drawbridge and barricade erupted into flames, defending soldiers stepping back from it. Their skirmish continued till the cannon fell in behind Junius’s troops.

“Stand back, let the crew do their job,” Junius ordered.

Mage blasts began focusing on the parting shieldwall. The Dragonborn's wards kept the crew safe till a lit fuse appeared in his sights. He stepped back, and shot fireballs at soldiers on the wall guarding the bridge's west. The defenders fell back, and a great noise followed. The first cannon blast tore through the drawbridge, and the next tore through a legionary shieldwall by the barricade. Three Morag Tong assassins appeared at the opposite bank, and they let down the drawbridge.

Junius signed forwards to his berserkers, and they charged as the next shot fired. They fell upon their foes who had lost cohesion, now routing and retreating in face of cannonfire. The palisade across caught fire, and the Morag Tong tore it down with axes. Junius raised his axe and cried havoc.

"For Shor! For Skyrim!"

He froze the river below, the ice rough enough to let troops walk. The rebels filled the gaps their cannon tore through. A shieldwall pushing onwards, spears piercing through flesh, pushing back hesitant defenders. Junius let his Voice force back shieldwalls still holding. FUS ROH DAH. Loyalist bodies flung into air, bones cracking and neck breaking after falling. A Shadow Legionary flung an ice spike at him. The Dragonborn slowed time, caught the spike, approached his would be killer. He plunged the spike into his neck.

"Fall back to the Longhouse!" a familiar voice barked. "Make our last stand!"

"Shor have mercy on you!" a rebel cried. A legionary shieldwall steadied backwards, Stormcloak crossbows and dunmer magic pouring onto them. Over a distance, Junius could hear bellowing giants, roaring dragons. A strong sulfur smell, mixing with burning wood, smoking flesh, steaming blood. Yells and cries and growls and roars, by either side. A few civilian children, crying from streetside chaos in

boarded up homes.

“Keep charging!” a berserker shouted.

“The loyalists can’t hold up!”

Skill of arms alone failed in the Legion. Stringent formation, discipline, mobility, all these helped the Legion dominate the field.

Yet this was not the field.

Stormcloak greataxes fell upon legionary helmets, auxiliary mail. Halbeds and pollaxes thrust and cut, advancing into desperate masses of flesh and steel. Caking blood in the cold north dulled some blades, whose foes fell ill from glancing hits after the battle. A battle no more furious than Whiterun was, yet denser in fury for the siege had taken short before the first assault.

The assault kept its fury till they reached the road between Moorside Inn and Highmoon Hall. Imperial archers took shots at holding shield-walls, bellowing giants, impetuous berserkers. Disciples of Jhunal cast smoke around the Longhouse, and dunmer mages blasted frost and flame at the whole palisade. The earlier assault forces had linked up with Junius’s flanking team. Ralof by the docks waved over to Junius, who nodded back. His housecarls and companions cheered him. Loyalist reinforcements guarding the stretch from Labyrinthian to Morthal would break. Victory was near, and Hjaalmarch would be theirs.

Then loud horns rang as the sun rose.

A mass of charging metal-clad hooves, scales glinting under dawning sun, enchanted lances pointing to their foes. A loud crash into Junius’s forces, the Stormcloak host now fully trapped in the city. Junius’s face froze as his troops fled and routed, cries of panic and disorder ringing as Junius pulled over some men demanding their allegiance only to be turned away as their clothes tore in their panic. The flanking cavalry ran down a fleeing rebel, his head skewered by a lance, then trampled

fleeing forces running for their lives to the docks.

Magic cracked the air, and Stormcloaks who felt the shock glowed blue, their bones showing as shock seeped their souls from their bodies. Junius threw fireballs and frost storms and lightning chains at the charging cavalry. He received fireballs back, singing his cloak and heating his helmet red hot. He threw it off, and fought the entire cavalry force himself. He cast a storm vortex around him, throwing the cavalry in disarray. His Voice flung another wedge to the river, and he threw magicka flares at a charging cavalryman whose body exploded into a bloody mess. Yet his fighting would not stop the next wave of cataphracts, and the Dragonborn could only ready his axe for a fight.

“Dragonborn, get yourself together!” Galmar roared, leading spearmen to shield him from the cataphracts. “We can’t have you dying in this poor village, can we?”

Dunmer mages returned fire, only for Poeniti Oculati to slit their throats. Morag Tong assassins dueled their Imperial counterparts, whose entrance from the longhouse had just come to the rebels’ view. Shadow legionaries cut a swathe through the docks, waterwalking magic letting them flank the rebels unawares. Breton knights charged over the river into the docks, taking down the unorganized rebel mess.

Three dragons approached overhead, crashing after scorpion bolts bit their wings. A ballista flung shots to the Stormcloak leadership. Arrald swung his pollaxe last through an auxiliary’s neck, a ballista shot passing through his frozen heart.

“Stand fast!” Junius barked, flames breathing into the air as he did. The Nords saw the dragon’s voice made flame and started forming shieldwalls. Those fleeing in front met loyalist blade and magic. The rest stayed strong,

Some Cataphracts charged at a shieldwall, feel of spear through lamellar scaring the horses and sending their riders back to the river.

The Morag Tong's duel with Poenitus agents ended when Galmar and Junius hacked the spies to bits. Dunmer mages casted runes on the palisades, blasting them and filling the space behind them with smoke. Woad-soaked berserkers charged in, hacking at friend and foe alike. Junius himself casted runes over the longhouse walls. A single whisper, and blasts tore the wood to shreds. Berserkers charged in and fought with the guardsmen.

"Shieldwall around the Jarl!" There was the familiar voice again. He locked eyes with the commander as Junius readied his Voice. The man from Helgen, who had helped him escape. Junius sighed, and he raised a hand.

"Peace, stand down."

The berserkers flinched and look at each other, then Junius.

"Hadvar of Riverwood," Junius began. "I offer you this last chance to surrender."

"No surrender for us, Dragonborn."

"Aye, Junius," a woman said. "You may have had us fooled when Jarl Elisif named you thane. But the Empire endures, and you will not."

A javelin flung towards the Dragonborn, who caught it. He grasped it with both hands, bent it, broke it.

"As you wish."

He breathed in, focused magicka on his lungs. FO KRAH DIIN. His breath turned frost through ancient tongue, the cold sweeping through the room, freezing his foes across. Their skin paling, some limbs and toes and fingers cut from hearts, men in front collapsing and shattering. No mere enchantment could save them from the Voice.

"Charge!" the man from Helgen said.

Loyal berserkers took the blow, woad-doused chests deflecting spears

and swords, trading their hits with axes. Sometimes a blow landed somewhere unwounded. Junius cast healing on his men, keeping them fresh through the fight. The last legionaries standing could barely do so, blood seeping from cuts and bruises.

“Fight both of us like the Dragonborn you are,” the woman said. “I’d gladly trade my life for my men.”

“I shall grant your wish.”

Junius brought out his axe and he walked forward. The woman leapt at him, swinging her sword in a large arc. Junius hit her lamellar breastplate, then moved to finish her. Then he felt a sting at his armpit, hitting the culprit with the blunt of his axe. The Helgen commander stumbled backwards, and the Dragonborn’s breath Voiced flame. His foe rolled away, Junius’s Voice trailing him. Then he felt a sword about to strike, grasping the blade as it trailed his nape. He swiveled his arm round his head, grasped the woman’s sleeve and threw her to the ground. He readied his axe once more and started for another blow when an old woman’s voice cried from afar.

“Peace! ”

Part IV.

The Parley

But if the Empire should slacken in its dedication to the Nine Divines, or if the blood of Alessia's heirs should fail, then shall the barriers between Tamriel and the Daedric realms fall, and Daedra-worshippers might summon lesser Daedra and undead spirits to trouble the races of men.

The Amulet of Kings, Wenengrus Monhona

Galmar

“Neogotiations. Poohey!”

Galmar spat on the ground. The thought of new negotiations made his taste go bad.

Bryling

Lydia

Olfrid

Brelyna

Jordis

Duach

They brought out a Nord captive, one of the legionaries they had captured. He had been made to drink a barrel of mead the past hour. Duach unsheathed a longsword. His troops chained the Nord to columns, and the witchblade whispered a prayer to the Hunt-Father. A swing to the Nord's limbs, then his body, then his throat. The troops hacked at the dying man, intoxicated enough not to scream. Then his body parts burned, eaten, leftovers thrown into the river Karth.

“Hunt-Father grant us strength to overthrow Nord oppression!”

“Our day shall come!”

Now the men gathered swung wildly at each other in ecstatic violent frenzy till one of them collapsed. His throat slit, body burned and eaten, leftovers thrown into the river Karth. The survivors knelt and thanked their fallen comrade for his sacrifice to Peyrite.

Junius

“Make for the Karth River Keep.”

The Dragonborn rode his dragon atop thousands of men marching from the Tundra Plateau. He had left Fort Sungard’s garrison to the Reachmen’s mercy. Some troops had their bodies torn apart in ritual sacrifice to their Hunt-Father, then thrown to Sungard Pass below. Others had been impaled for Haafingar to see ruther north, their screams echoing across the Karth and Frost rivers. Madanach’s Forsworn had charged into the Reach as advance guard, unaware of whom they had aided. They would in due time, Junius mused. For now, the Stormcloaks made for Karthwasten.

Part V.

The Fall

The Empire's legions are needed at home. One day, a peaceful, united Empire will return...and exact severe retribution for the disaster...and for our fallen Emperor. But that day is not now, nor in the foreseeable future.

Report: Disaster at Ionith, Lord Pottreid

Junius

Blue bear banners hung outside Castle Dour. Junius looked to his left. Some footmen had dragged out the Thalmor nearby, had cut their limbs before slitting their throats. Some mages flung fireballs skyward, some gunners shot their muskets. What passed for celebration here, the Dragonborn thought.

Jarl Ulfric marched to the castle courtyard. Cowering civilians gathered, stared at their future king. Junius could make out the tailors Taarie and Endaarie, the barkeep Corpulus Vinus, the lady Vittoria Vici and her Stormcloak husband. Some soldiers marched amid them. They brought out whom they led. Jarl Elisif, her clothes dull, washed out forms of what she had worn before. Her hair and face messy.

“And now, I present to you, Ulfric Stormcloak, hero of the people, liberator and High King of Skyrim!” Galmar said.

Soldiers cheered as the Jarl marched to their center. Ulfric gestured for Junius to join him.

“I am indeed Ulfric Stormcloak, and at my side the man we know as Stormblade, and the world knows as the Dragonborn.”

Soldiers hailed his name, and his housecarls and companions and allies did too.

“And indeed, there are many that call us heroes. But it is all of you who are the true heroes!”

“Long live the Nords!”

“Long may Shor reign!”

“All hail to Skyrim!”

“It was you who fought a dying Empire who sunk its claws into our

land, trying to drag us down with it. It was you who fought the Thalmor and their puppets who would have us deny our gods and our heritage. It was you who fought your kin who didn't understand our cause, who weren't willing to pay the price of our freedom. But more than that, it was you who fought for Skyrim, for our right to fight our own battles... To return to our glory and traditions, to determine our own future!"

All the troops cheered as one.

"And it is for these reasons that I cannot accept the mantle of High King. Not until the Moot declares that title should adorn my shoulders will I accept it"

"And what about Jarl Elisif?" a crossbowman shouted.

"Yes, what about the Lady Elisif?" Ulfric asked in turn. The soldiers laughed and cheered.

"Will she put aside her personal hatred for me, and her misplaced love for the Emperor and his coin, so that the suffering of our people will end? Will she acknowledge that it is we Nords who will determine Skyrim's future? Will she swear fealty to me, so all may know that we are at peace, and a new day has dawned?"

Haafingar's Jarl quivered, then answered. "I do."

"Then it is settled. The Jarl will continue to rule Solitude, I will garrison armies here to ward off Imperial attempts to reclaim the city. And in due time, the Moot will meet, and settle the claim to High King once and for all. There is much to do, and I need every able bodied man and woman committed to rebuilding Skyrim. A great darkness is growing, and soon we will be called to fight it, on these shores or abroad. The Aldmeri Dominion may have defeated the Empire, but it has not defeated Skyrim!"

Everyone cheered. The civilians kept quiet, their faces blank after

half a year under siege. The crowd would soon disperse, leaving only Ulfric, Galmar, and Junius.

“How’d I do?”

“Eh, not so bad. Nice touch about the High King.”

“Thank you, I thought so, too.”

“It’s a foregone conclusion, you know.”

“Oh, I know.”

“The Imperials aren’t going to leave us alone. They still have camps in the hills. They’ll continue to strike out at us, whenever and wherever they can.”

“I’m not afraid of the remnants of the Legion, in time they’ll all give up and go home. What I fear, is that the Thalmor will see our victory here and turn greater attention to our shores. We must be prepared to face them.”

“Aye.”

“And of course, we couldn’t have done it without you. May the gods preserve you.”

“May the gods preserve us all.”

“Come, Galmar. We’ve still much work to do.”

“Ulfric,” the Dragonborn asked. “Is there anything I can do to further the cause?”

Ulfric smiled. “True sons and daughters of Skyrim reign in every city, we’ve crippled the Imperial Legion, and cut off its head by killing General Tullius himself. What more could I ask of you?”

“He’s right,” Galmar said.

“No, you are free to roam. I suspect the gods have needs for you elsewhere.”

A hot breeze blew, drawn by the siege fires burning out.

"That said, some of the Legion's staunchest men have organized themselves, and are operating out of hidden military camps in the wilderness. If you come across any Imperials in your travels, I expect you'll know what to do."

"Will there be peace?"

"There will be peace for a time, during which we must rebuild Skyrim into the land it once was. Strong. Self-reliant. The center of mankind. Because getting rid of the Empire was only half the problem. Soon, the elves will again seek to rule the world. We must ready ourselves to fight them. For it will be Skyrim that shall lead Tamriel in those dark days, when the fate of the world is finally determined."

"Should I call you High King now?"

"No, not yet. We'll wait for the Moot to name me High King. It'll be better for all that way. But, that doesn't mean I won't start acting like it."

The Jarl and his housecarl laughed.

"There's much to do. The new Jarls need help building armies, and enforcing their right to rule. The Empire may try to reclaim Skyrim, and I need everyone ready for that. Though the biggest threat, of course, is the elves."

The night grew old, and Junius walked the distance to his home in the city. Proudspire Manor survived the siege intact, still as fresh and new as when he had bought it. He entered, and found the scent of food and drink greeting him. His wives had already retired there, tidying the place for their lord.

"Would you join us, Junius?" Brelyna asked.

"Time you pay up for missing out on combat training," Lydia said.

“I must say, it’s nice to be back here after years,” Jordis said.

“It’s rather fancy here. How much money did you earn after the Darkwater ambush?” Sylgia said.

Junius began answering. “I say it’s time to have some quality time with my family after these hard years.” Then his mind cleared. The voice of a laughing man, mocking the world’s madness in not recognizing how mad it was. A feeling, that Junius should visit an old friend. “But that can wait for later.”

He left his manor, his wives only looking at each other and shrugging. The Dragonborn made his way past rich houses, burnt or broken during the siege. At last, past them all, the Blue Palace.

“Good evening, my Thane,” the steward said, frowning. “You have business with the court?”

“Just visiting for the evening.”

“Do take your time,” he said, walking off.

Junius made his way past the atrium, into a door long sealed. Servants greeted him as their Thane, frowning and averting his eyes. Understandable, after all the siege had done.

He entered the Pelagius Wing, started making his way past ancient furniture, drink and food too well-preserved for their age. At last, he climbed up stairs, walked through the hallway.

Then he was back in a land full of color, lacking it at once. Mania, dementia, playing together to form a land of madness. There, a man in a purple suit, grinning at who had just entered.

“My my, Junius,” the mad god said. “What a terrible fate you marched into.”

“Damn it, Bendu. Show yourself.”

Before his eyes the mad god’s purple clothes were no more, only

Nibenayese clothes. The old man became a young one, still full of energy, yet eyes tired and cynical.

“Happy now, that you’ve conquered Skyrim?”

“It wasn’t supposed to end this way.”

“What next, Ulfric and his pals, too?”

“Tell me what to do, damn it!”

“I have to say, Arne and Gertrude had the right idea, don’t you think? Running off to some hamlet in High Rock. How is he, I wonder? Still feeding off Gertrude’s nymphic powers I guess.”

“Shut it. I came here for one reason only, and you know it too.”

“Very well, Junie-boy. You want to see what the future brings?”

“Yes.”

“Think of cheese, Junie-boy.”

“Cheese? What are you—”

“Cheese is golden. Just like your future.”

“So I get rid of Ulfric? I get to be High King of Skyrim? Emperor of Tamriel?”

“You shall, Junius. You shall.”

King Lyandir was disappointed that more of them did not follow his example and lead frugal, sensible lives. He brooded on this for many years. Finally, he decided that his subjects simply didn't understand how much more they could accomplish if they didn't waste time on those frivolous activities.

Tales of the Mad God